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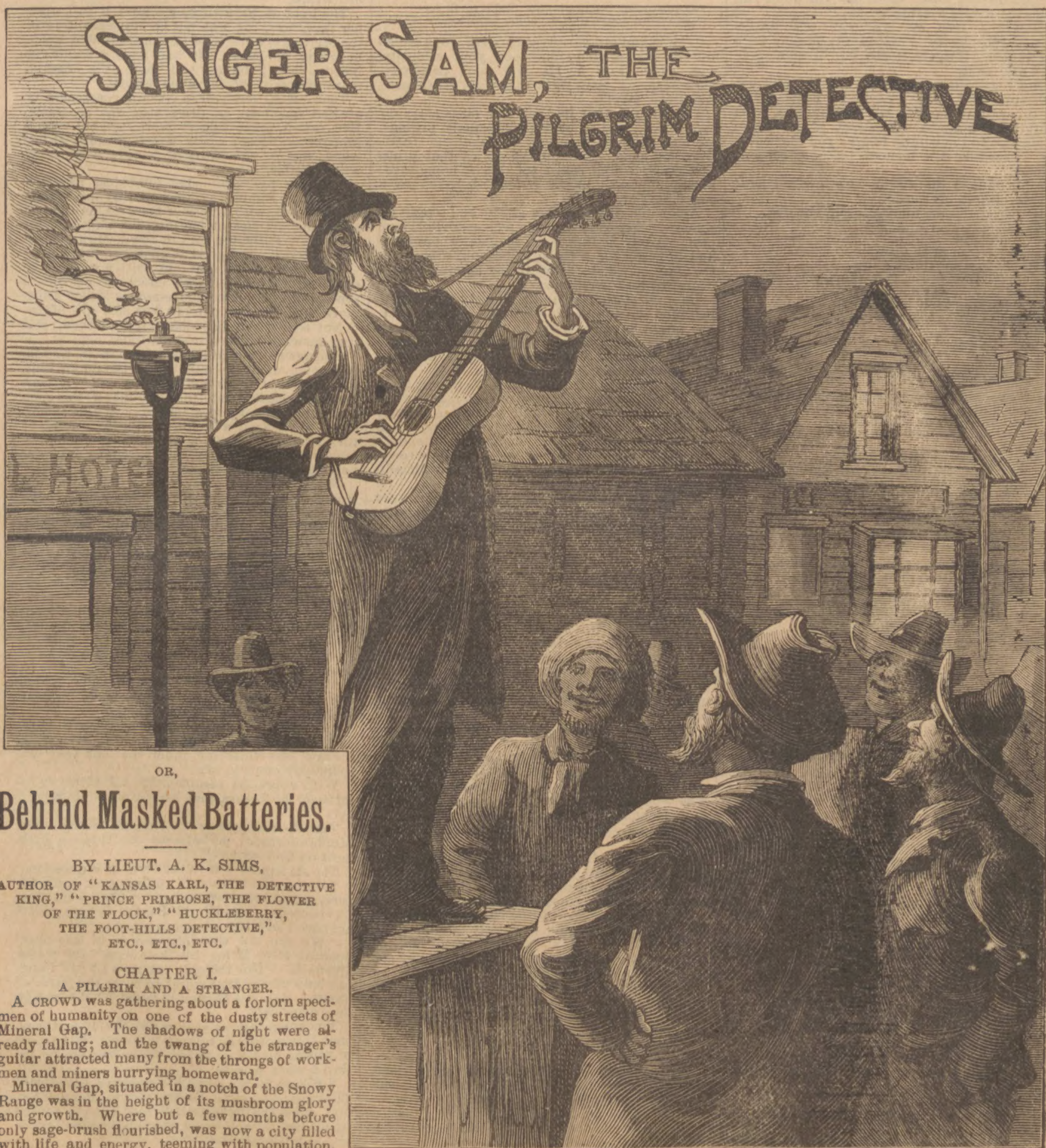
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OR,

Behind Masked Batteries.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF "KANSAS KARL, THE DETECTIVE
KING," "PRINCE PRIMROSE, THE FLOWER
OF THE FLOCK," "HUCKLEBERRY,
THE FOOT-HILLS DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PILGRIM AND A STRANGER.

A CROWD was gathering about a forlorn specimen of humanity on one of the dusty streets of Mineral Gap. The shadows of night were already falling; and the twang of the stranger's guitar attracted many from the throngs of workmen and miners hurrying homeward.

Mineral Gap, situated in a notch of the Snowy Range was in the height of its mushroom glory and growth. Where but a few months before only sage-brush flourished, was now a city filled with life and energy, teeming with population, and boasting all the modern improvements.

HIS FINGERS SWEEPED THE STRINGS OF THE GUITAR AND HE LIFTED HIS VOICE DOLEFULLY.

The individual around whom the people were flocking scarcely needed the light of the flaring torch, which he had erected beside the dry-goods box whereon he stood. The rays of an electric lamp across the way fully illuminated everything. But he had set up his torch, nevertheless; and now, in spite of the general dilapidation and semi-semblance of distress that characterized him, looked out upon his growing audience with a smile; while his fingers swept the strings of the guitar and he lifted his voice dolefully:

"I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger!
I can tarry—I can tarry but a night!
Do not detain me, for I am going
To where the fountains are ever flowing.
I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger;
I can tarry—I can tarry but a night!"

A universal howl of derision arose at this point, forcing the singer to suspend in the midst of his song. It was not that his voice was not clear and pleasant. It was a tenor of much compass and sweetness. The words, too, accorded strongly with his apparent condition. He did indeed seem a pilgrim and a stranger, dropped from nowhere into their midst—a wanderer and a half-vagabond. But, it was not this that caused the protest. The sentiment of the sad, old hymn was not pleasing.

"What fountain aire ye lookin' fer?" one of the listeners questioned, as the singer glanced with a smile of inquiry at the objectors. "The fountains don't flow hyer wuth a cent, 'thout you put up the dust. Good drinkin' don't run free in the streets o' Mineral Gap!"

"Nothin' is free, my dear sir!" with an attempt at jocularly. "Even my Magic Cure costs money. But, it's worth it! Worth every cent I ask for it."

"But I see you want a song! You shall not be disappointed. My repertury holds about ever'thing that's sung by the best singers, from Daddylina Patty to the sweet singer from Michigan, and I'm willing to give you the benefit of it. I see this is a business place, so I'll sing business!"

He thrummed the guitar for a few moments while he cleared his throat.

"Let 'er go!" some hilarious soul shouted. And this was his response:

"Tis not for your filthy lucre,
'Tis not for your tinkling tin;
'Tis not for your ready, your rhino, your stamps,
That I travel this vale of sin!
'Tis the good I can do my fellows;
And the sorrows that I efface,
With my magical,
Ragical,
Fragical,
Tragical,
Cure for the human race!"

"Have you corns on your toes? Have you pains in your head?
Diseases of body or mind?
Are your ears stopped with sawdust to charity's call?
And to misery sore are you blind?
Is your conscience cold? Do your pulses clog
When to want you are brought face to face?
Take my magical,
Ragical,
Fragical,
Tragical,
Cure for the human race!"

"There is nothing wrong that it cannot right!
'Twill mend all the rents in your clothes,
'Twill take that brick from out of your hat,
And draw that tint from your nose.
'Twill banish the terrible fever called 'love';—
All aches and pains 'twill efface!—
Here's my magical,
Ragical,
Fragical,
Tragical,
Cure for the human race!"

"Have a bottle! Only fifty cents!
"Gentlemen," as no one rushed with eager arms to grasp the cure—all so highly recommended in his verse, "I used to sell this for a quarter—but I've riz on the price. If a man wants to have his cracked conscience glued together by this medicine, he can afford to pay fifty cents for it!"

"Only fifty cents!" stepping about on the dry-goods box and extending the bottle temptingly. "It'll do just what I claim for it. Cure a headache in three minutes, by the watch. Peel a corn off'n your great toe quicker'n you can lift a mortgage, to save your neck! The greatest liniment that was ever produced. Just as good, too, for a burro as 'tis for a man. Have your burros got the epizootic or your children the chicken-pox? Just take home a bottle and try it. Just try it! An' if it don't do what I say it will do, I'll agree to drink it, myself. Harmless! Why, gentlemen, it's as harmless as water; and mighty near as cheap. Fifty cents for a bottle of truck that'll set you on the high road to health, wealth and prosperity!"

"Better come before the rush! for some days I'm that busy a-handin' it out that it's impossible to 'commode' all."

"Have a bottle?"

A serio-comic air hovered about the medicine-vender. He seemed a representative of decayed respectability—an individual who had seen better days. His rusty clothing hung loosely.

His grayish beard, the sport of the evening wind, needed the touch of a barber. But his hat—an ancient silk tile—seemed to link him to a more stylish past; and his worn shoes shone from a fresh polishing. The seriousness that clung to him, as well as the humorous quaintness of his remarks, keyed as they were to an anxious pitch in spite of their banter, appeared to be part and parcel of his very nature. One would be inclined to be sorry for him and to laugh at him at the same time.

There are men who will buy anything that is put up for sale. No matter what is offered they cannot resist making a purchase. They belong to that great class who are born to be humbugged at every opportunity. One of these extended a fifty-cent piece, and received in return a bottle of the medicine.

It seemed to furnish fresh inspiration to the vender. His eloquence rose anew. He also became more specific in his declarations of what the liniment would accomplish; and others emboldened by example, passed up their money for a bottle of the Magic Cure.

"Gentlemen," beaming with pardonable pleasure, "this is something like. It reminds me of the days in Denver, when I use to rake in the shekels hand-over-fist. If this keeps up a little while, I'll be feelin' as rich as Cresop!"

He was getting his history mixed and mingling Aesop with Croesus. Beating time with one of the bottles, he again broke into song.

"That's right, gentlemen! Tumble up! Tumble up!"

"Come along, come along! Make no delay!
Come from every nation, come from every way!"

"Come and get yerselves cured of your pangs and paregorics, your aches and your ailments, your pinched-up hearts and your paralyzed purse-strings! Step right this way, gentlemen! Right this way!"

The impulse that had led the purchasers on had ebbed; and in spite of his many urgings, no one stepped forward to take the bottle from his hand. Around the crowd that pressed closely to him rolled the tide of homeward-bound humanity, like a stream deflected by a rocky barrier.

Again he caught up his guitar and sought by a song to stay some of those who were hurrying past. A few of the more curious dropped out and lingered for a time; remaining even after the song ended, to listen to his running fire of comment and persuasion.

In spite of the apparent anxiety with which he urged the sale of his medicine, a close observer might have detected an occasional furtiveness of glance, which showed that he was more closely watching what was going on, and who was passing, than he seemed to be.

If he was a student of faces, there was truly much food for thought presented in many of the countenances before him. It was a motley throng he looked upon, composed as it was of all classes and conditions of men, from the busy merchants tarrying for a moment, to the shrew-faced bootblacks standing on tip-toe with self-assertive aggressiveness.

If he saw what he was looking for, he gave no sign; but continued to cry his wonderful remedy, at intervals sandwiching in a song.

CHAPTER II.

A SUSPICIOUS GLANCE.

THE medicine-vender had not been standing long beneath the glare of the torchlight, when a stage rattled up the street to the roomy station on the opposite corner.

With a flourish of his whip, the Jehu drew in the foaming and dust-covered horses; then nimbly descended from the box to the ground, threw open the coach door, and assisted a woman to alight.

She was somewhat comely in appearance, though rather large; and, so far as one could judge—for a long cloak partially enveloped her—was arrayed in rich and dressy fabrics. She was closely veiled; and, after paying the boy who took charge of her hand-sachel, turned for a moment to look at the singer, who was at that instant engaged in one of his metrical outbursts.

She gave a slight start as her eyes fell upon him. She slipped the veil partly from her face that she might see more clearly, and seemed to hang as if entranced on his words.

"It's Benton!" she whispered, pulling the veil into place and turning nervously up the street. "I'm sure of it. He's very cleverly got-up, but my eyes are too good for him to fool me. I'd recognize him anywhere."

She was manifestly much agitated by her supposed discovery. Whoever the man was whom she called Benton, it was plain his presence tended to disturb her.

"Now, what is he doing here?"
"Ma'am?"

She had inadvertently expressed herself aloud, and she now observed the urchin at her side look questioningly up into her face.

"What is who doing here, ma'am?"

She frowned behind her veil, but replied smoothly enough:

"Did I speak? I must have been talking to

myself. Who is that singer we saw on the corner?"

It was a point on which the boy could give no information. The medicine-vender had only come into town that evening, so far as the boy knew; and the lad's looks revealed that with all his boyish nature he was longing to go back, that he might further hear the rollicking of the songs and the twanging of the guitar.

On arriving near her destination, she dismissed him with a kindly word, and hurried into an imposing building, climbing the stairs with a marvelous rapidity for one so fleshy.

There was a light burning in a room on the second floor, and into this room she entered without ceremony.

There were two men in the room, lolling easily back in luxurious arm-chairs and puffing clouds of tobacco smoke, to the great detriment of the hangings.

It was a richly furnished apartment, everything being of the costliest character and latest design, such as one would not expect to find so far from the heart of civilization.

"You must have come up those stairs three steps at a time," one of the men coolly observed, after removing his cigar from his lips. "I thought it was one of the servants. Such exertions in a woman of your build might be fraught with serious consequences."

This was said with a lazy indifference not at all pleasant to the one addressed.

She bit her lip to conceal her annoyance, as she threw back her veil and began to remove her wraps.

The light of the swinging lamp fell full upon her face, now. It was not an unpleasant face, though there were lines of unmistakable sternness and harshness. It had been a handsome face in days gone by, and there still lingered many traces of this departed beauty.

There was, however, a certain coarseness of air and flashiness of dress that was repellent. Her rather large fingers were covered with a profusion of rings, a gold watch gleamed at her waist, and a superfluity of jewelry was everywhere visible.

"If you had seen what I did just now you would have tumbled up the stairway headlong!" she declared, with a flash of her eyes, as she put away the articles of clothing she had just removed. "If Benton isn't in town, Major Dinsmore, then I'm not good at guessing, that's all!"

The words were shot out with a suddenness startling of itself; but their effect was not due to this. Both the man addressed as Major Dinsmore, and his companion, lost the air of indolent ease which had characterized them, and bent forward with earnest attitude.

Dinsmore's companion was a man in middle life, being about the same age as the major himself. There the resemblance ceased. Except for his noticeable indolence, the major was such a man as one may meet any day in almost any city. He seemed a well-to-do business man, of the mercantile class;—a man who was making, and had made, money, and to whom life was passing pleasantly enough.

Not so with the other. From the top of his iron-gray head to the soles of his heavy boots, he looked the villain; and his looks did not belie the facts. With the exception of a mustache, the same hue as his hair, his face was smooth; and it had a hang-dog, lowering expression that was anything but pleasing. This worthy associate and familiar, the major addressed as Tinchman.

"I reckon you must 'a' been mistaken 'bout that!" Tinchman observed, running his knuckly fingers uneasily through his hair. "What in the name o' all that's out, would Benton be a-doin' here?"

"You and the major ought to know, if any one does," the woman enigmatically replied, sinking into a chair opposite the two.

"Of course Madame Muriel is densely ignorant, herself!" and Dinsmore sneered, even while his face was whitening under the fear that had so quickly come to him.

With a sigh, he resumed his old attitude, interlaced his fingers, and looked questioningly at her.

"As the madame is so good at telling other people's fortunes, perhaps she can throw a little light on this subject?"

The statement was in the form of a question.

"Bother the fortunes!" ruffling as if some aspersion had been cast on her. "This is no time for nonsense, major! If Benton is here, and I am sure I saw him, it means mischief!"

"We are not the only people in this over-boomed town living by their wits!" the major affirmed. "Nor the only people who are hanging onto money that ought to be in the purse of others. Suppose Benton is here? That's no sign he is after us!"

Tinchman saw, as well as did Madame Muriel, that Dinsmore was talking more for the purpose of raising his own courage than because he believed what he said.

"Where is the chap?" Tinchman asked, still thinking she might be the victim of an error; and, when the madame informed him, he picked up his hat, drew it down over his beetling brows, and hurried into the street.

He was back within a very short time, his

manner showing belief that the madame was correct in her conjecture. The others had nervously awaited his return, and their fears, from whatever cause, were now renewed.

"I couldn't swear that it's him," he declared, adding a number of bitter invectives to fill out and strengthen the declaration. "But it's my honest belief that it is. Hang the scamp! I'd like to choke him! And I'll do it, too, if he tries to play any roots on us. He's on a dandy lay, and rigged out beautiful, though, and likewise deceiving. I reckon I might 'a' listened to them songs and gags, and that poverty racket, for a week, without ever takin' a tumble to it!"

There was in the words great admiration for the madame's sagacity and shrewdness. In Tobe Tinchman's estimation, there were few smarter women in the West, or on the footstool, for that matter.

Although Dinsmore's hands trembled from the fear that possessed him, he still wished to give a favorable turn to the discovery.

"Admitting that it's Benton! What does it prove? He followed us for a month or two, ten years ago or more, and we thought he was then piping this particular business. And we were mistaken. He wasn't after us, at all!"

"But he was, major! Who else was he after, pray?"

"Not on account of this business, anyhow! I'd give a penny—"

"To be able to knife him!" Tinchman gritted. "Let me finish my sentence, will you? I'd give a penny to know what he is up to!"

"And I'd give a thousand dollars! Yes; ten of them! That is, if I could head him off in his plans, as well as know what his plans are."

"Better give me that ten thousand, my—"

"Dinsmore, you're a fool!" a hot flash sweeping to her face. "You never was anything but a rattlepate; and I've been another fool for—"

"Grant it, my dear. But we'll be fools no longer. Take your side of the case, if it pleases you. This man is Benton, the detective—one of the sharpest, shrewdest men in the business. He's here for us. A number of years ago—it would make us seem too old if I should say just how many—we got hold of a little pile of money, and were not very scrupulous in the taking of it. And there were some children mixed up in it, and a valuable estate, and a good deal more, that, as I'm not dictating a book, I'll not take the trouble to recount. Say that all this is so, and that that is what brought him here. My dear madame, and my ever-true friend Tobias, what's to hinder us from ringing in a cold deal on him? Beating him at his own game? There never was a man so great that he could not be over-reached, and never was there a plan so carefully laid that it could not be thwarted. *We'll fight the devil with fire!*"

The air of banter vanished from his tones as he proceeded, to be replaced by that of intense earnestness. The indolent manner had gone, too. In fact, there seemed to be a sudden and complete change in the man's physical and mental make-up. His brows were knit and his eyes flashed as he made the final resolute declaration. It could be seen that Major Dinsmore might prove a worthy antagonist for any man, if once thoroughly aroused.

This change was pleasing both to the madame and to Tinchman. The madame was not accustomed to follow anybody's lead, but Tinchman could not advance a foot without the piloting of a stronger mind. He could carry out and tread down, though, in his rough, harsh, heartless way; and no work was too stern or too perilous for him to undertake, if there seemed a necessity for it.

"You'll have a chance to do some of that kind of fighting! And before long!"

In this the madame expressed her sincere belief.

Yet there were many things to show that Dinsmore's first view of the case might be the correct one. The fact that they had committed some crime in the long ago, for which they were still wanted, combined with the other fact that Benton, the detective, was in town, scarcely appeared to warrant the conclusions to which they had leaped.

But guilt is ever fearful, ever sees danger lurking in the most unsuspecting circumstance, ever flies at the first whisper of peril. And so it was now; and so it will be to the end of the calendar.

"It won't be the first time we have done hard fighting," Dinsmore replied, to her last statement. "And Benton won't be the first man to wish he had let us severely alone!"

The stern, ominous silence with which this was greeted by the madame and Tinchman was more eloquent of danger to the medicine-vender than a multitude of words.

CHAPTER III.

MADAME MURIEL AT HOME.

OVER the door of one of the stairways leading into the building wherein the talk was had between the woman and the two men, was a small, gilt sign, bearing this inscription:

"MADAME MURIEL,

Clairvoyant."

There were constantly in all the papers, also, advertisements, after this fashion:

"MADAME MURIEL, *Clairvoyant*:—Foretells the future. Finds lost money and treasure. Brings together lovers. Teaches how to win the affections of those of the opposite sex. Directs how to choose a suitable partner in life. Madame Muriel never fails in her prognostications: being the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, and gifted with true prophetic foresight. Call on her at her rooms, 155 Laclede street. No publicity."

As may be imagined, such claims had some weight with the more ignorant of the people of Mineral Gap; and she was especially sought by servant girls from the restaurants and kitchens, and credulous miners and workingmen, and was even visited by gamblers whose belief in luck amounted to superstition. These latter, as a rule, cared nothing for her fortune-telling powers, being mainly anxious to know what were their lucky days and what games it would be wisest to bet on.

On the morning after her conversation with Dinsmore and Tinchman, Madame Muriel was seated in her den at the head of the stairway which led upward from the gilt sign. There were other rooms back of the one in which she was seated; and all were furnished with a richness that had scarcely a parallel in Mineral Gap. Mirrors peeped out in odd places from among the gorgeous hangings, and in one of the rooms beyond a small fountain played musically.

The madame herself, if not literally "clothed in purple and fine linen," was arrayed in a way to put the glories of Solomon to the blush. With silks and satins made up after the latest Parisian design, with roses in her corsage and in her hair, her appearance was well calculated to strike envy to the hearts of the ignorant girls who were in the habit of calling on her.

The rooms had been darkened, and in them burned what has been termed "a dim religious light." This was for the purpose of heightening the general effect she desired to produce, and of giving a semblance of weirdness to the grotesque statuary with which the place was lavishly adorned. There were many naked Cupids disporting themselves in various unnatural attitudes; and there were Bacchuses, Satyrs, and a whole colony of figures from the mythological Greek.

The center of this weird and singular display, the madame was as weird and singular as anything there. A circlet of gold, or gilt, rested on her forehead. And now, as she heard a ring at the door, she grasped something that looked like a Neptunean trident, and composed herself in state in a throne-like chair.

A small boy flew from some unknown quarter to open the door and usher in the visitor.

The madame's stiffness relaxed when she saw who the caller was. It was a waiting-girl from an eating-house not far away, one of the madame's familiars and assistants.

There was nothing remarkable in the appearance of this girl, save a certain sliding gait indicative of feline instincts, and a cat-like way of peering from the corner of her eyes, which heightened the similitude.

As soon as she saw that the new-comer was not one demanding her professional services, the madame tossed the trident down carelessly, and sought a more comfortable chair. In this she leaned, in a lounging attitude, as she looked closely at the girl.

"I was sure it was some one wanting to know how to get back a lost lover!" laughing in a quiet and sarcastic way. "The fact that there are lots of fools in the world is a good thing for us, Louise. Otherwise, we would be like Othello, our occupation gone."

With a smirking smile the girl sunk into a chair, and beamed admiringly at the woman before her. She was obviously conscienceless as the madame, and therefore saw much in her to envy and imitate.

"Jones has lost the gold ring that he bought for his sweetheart," said Louise, with a sly glance out of her eye- corners.

"Ah! I know Jones. He is the porter at the hotel over there, near your restaurant. What was the ring worth?"

"Not over a dollar!" and the girl sneered, at the same time feeling in the pocket of her dress and producing the ring in question.

Madame Muriel beamed encouragingly.

"You're a jewel, Louise," taking the ring and turning it round and round to examine it. "It's worth more than a dollar, though. Mr. Jones, the porter, gave five dollars for that, if he gave a penny. He must think a good deal of this girl of his!"

The madame was an expert in estimating the value of such articles, and this expertness did not come solely from the fact that she disported a large amount of jewelry herself.

"Faugh!" and Louise gave her nose a supercilious toss. "If I should ever have a fellow who would present me with such a ring as that, I'd give him his walking-papers!"

"Diamonds for you, eh? Perhaps Jones's sweetheart isn't so high-minded. If it hadn't been worth as much as five dollars, though, it wouldn't have paid you to take it. I'll have to charge Jones two dollars for telling him where to find it, and of course you'll want a dollar of that."

It was plain that there was a complete understanding between these two; a partnership, in fact, for the purpose of robbing the servants of the neighborhood.

"Have you noticed, Louise, that there have been a good many robberies in the city lately?" looking at the girl as slyly as the latter had previously looked at her.

There was an undercurrent of meaning in the question which Louise did not catch, else she would have returned the glance with one equally covert. She had not noticed anything out of the ordinary in that line, for there were always more or less robberies.

"The major says they are growing very frequent. There was a big one last night. I suppose you heard about how the store of Satin & Plush was entered, a lot of goods taken, and all the money the thieves could lay their hands on."

The surprising familiarity with the details of the burglary evinced by the madame would not have passed unnoticed by every one though Louise did not attach any particular meaning to it.

She was aroused, however, by the madame's next sentence.

"I think I know who did it!"

The girl's manner was the biggest kind of an interrogation point. The madame's statement promised food for gossip, and of this Louise was inordinately fond. Perhaps the burglar was none other than Jones, the porter!

"You saw the singer on the street last evening? The fellow who was singing songs and selling medicine?"

Louise could scarcely conceal her disappointment. She had no interest in the singer, and she had a very lively interest in Jones. She had never revealed it to the madame, but she was bitterly angry at the porter for preferring another girl to her winsome self.

"I feel sure that that singer was the very man who committed the robbery," the madame impulsively continued, not noticing Louise's lack of interest.

She did not condescend to give her reasons for this sweeping charge, contenting herself with simply making it. Louise had always apparently accepted her words as the embodiment of truth, and Madame Muriel saw no reason why she should not now. She did not seem to take into consideration the fact that Louise was cognizant of many things on her part which were little less criminal than burglary.

"I intend to set a trap for that fellow," and the madame interlaced her fingers thoughtfully, and rocked backward and forward in the big chair. "There will be more money in it, Louise, if I succeed, than there is in telling people where to find rings that we have taken from them and hidden for the purpose!"

"You are acquainted with the manager of the opera-house, at the corner of Nugent and Robinson?"

The corner indicated was that on which the medicine-vender had erected his torch the previous night. There was a building there boasting the title of the Opera-House Block, and on the second floor of this building was the commodious hall known as the Opera-House. It was only a dance-hall of the better order, but drew large audiences every night.

The manager spoken of by the madame also ran a saloon and gambling-hall on the lower floor, and paid much more attention to these than he did to his boasted Opera-House.

There had been rumors to the effect that Major Dinsmore was largely interested in these multifarious ventures, and that his money was really the support and prop of these institutions. It may have been this fact that caused the madame to turn her thoughts toward the Opera-House, or it may have been because the medicine-vender had chosen to set up his torch on that corner.

"Go to the manager," the madame said, when the girl had confessed an acquaintance with him, "and tell him that, with his permission, I will sing there for him to-night."

The girl was struck with amazement at this novel proposition. That Madame Muriel had an excellent voice she knew, as also did many people of Mineral Gap. On many occasions the madame had chosen to advertise herself by an exhibition of her "killing" wardrobe and her voice. Yet she had never sung in so public a place, or so questionable a one, as this hall.

"You don't see just what I'm driving at?" and the madame laughed behind her hand. "It concerns this street singer. Of course he will come to hear me. He can't help it; for I shall take away all of his crowd; and when he comes I hope to learn something of him."

On the surface the madame's idea pertained solely to the singer's supposed connection with the burglary at Satin & Plush's; and there was no way by which the girl might know that it had far deeper import.

When the girl had duly promised to make such arrangements as were necessary to enable the madame to sing at the hall that night, the subject of the ring, and kindred topics, was resumed.

"It will be safer I think to give the impression that this ring was not stolen," looking at it

again so that she could describe it perfectly, and passing it back to the girl. "I don't want the idea to get out that this section around here is a den of thieves. We will make Jones think he lost it."

The cat-like crafty look had again come into the eyes of the servant.

"Hide it in the corner of the lot, so it may look as if he had dropped it there; and when he comes to me, as he will before night, I'll tell him just what he has lost, and where he may find it!"

"And so we advertise our business! My dear Louise, if it wasn't for such as you, we clairvoyants and fortune-tellers would have a hard time."

Louise was ready to go; but before she did so, the madame closely questioned her concerning a number of superstitious servants, and others of like character, whom she half expected would visit her within the ensuing week.

And having gleaned the field as thoroughly as possible, and outlined other work for her crafty assistant, the madame dismissed her; and then sat down like the spider in his parlor waiting for the unsuspecting fly.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ACT OF HEROISM.

THE medicine-vender, who had already become known to the town as Singer Sam, was making his way along the street, just at night-fall. He had a box under one arm, and was proceeding to the place where on the previous night he had set up his torch. The box contained his guitar. The torch and his supply of medicine had been left at a store near the corner.

He was evidently giving himself up to some serious reflection, for his brows were knit, and muttered words, that were, however, indistinguishable, fell occasionally from his lips. Notwithstanding this, his keen eyes searched constantly the crowd that surged by him.

A clatter of horses, hoofs, a whir-r-r of wheels, and a scream attracted his attention.

A carriage was driving by. As he looked up, drawn by the sudden, sharp cry, he saw Madame Muriel seated in this carriage. On the driver's seat in front was a negro, who was at that moment sawing on the lines of the plunging horses.

A smile that was half sarcastic sat on the woman's face, even as she peered out beyond the pounding hoofs to the shapeless object that had fallen to the dust of the street.

A boy or man, it was hard to tell which, had been near the line of the carriage's route, or else had attempted to cross in front of the vehicle, and had been knocked down by the horses.

Singer Sam pushed the box against the building, even though to do so was to risk its destruction, and leaped toward the rearing horses.

In the short time given him he had not failed to note the look that rested on the woman's features. He could not understand it at the time. Future events were destined to bring clearer knowledge. If he had been called on to say what the look denoted, he would have declared unhesitatingly that it was a heartless indifference, or a wish to sacrifice the life of the one who had fallen.

There was no time for such thoughts, nor for any thought save that which gave the supreme impulse of the moment.

The scream had caused a sudden stopping of the hurrying throng and a blocking of this avenue of traffic. There were others there impelled as was the street singer, but none so quick in decision or so light of foot.

While the black driver was still tugging at the lines, for the horses seemed unmanageable, Singer Sam darted to the side of the prostrate form, threw back the threatening horses with a powerful wrench, and effected a rescue.

Lifting the limp form, he bore it from the street; while the horses, touched by the negro's whip, dashed furiously away, neither the driver nor the occupant of the carriage appearing to care to make any inquiries concerning the fate of the one who had been run down.

There was a drug store near, and into this the medicine-vender carried his burden, a throng of the curious following him. This had scarcely been accomplished when there hurried into the room a man, whose every action denoted intense anxiety and fear.

By the aid of the light, Singer Sam could now see that the one he had rescued was a youth, or young man, on whom the hand of affliction seemed to have been sorely laid; for the young man was a hunchback. This deformity was concealed in a large measure by a cloak which the youth wore; but it was revealed fully, now that the cloak had been disarranged and thrown back.

He had deposited the youth on the floor, intending to call for restoratives. It was a calm, placid face that looked up at the ceiling, though there was no light of consciousness in the eyes. A face pale and almost girlish in appearance.

Singer Sam had barely time to notice these things before the coming of the man, for whom the crowd gave way respectfully.

Even in the confusion of the moment the

medicine-vender caught the name of the newcomer, as it was whispered from lip to lip.

At the same instant, too, the eyes of the injured lad opened, as if consciousness had returned with the coming of this friend.

This indication that the lad's injuries were not of a serious character was hailed by the man with a cry of delight; and he caught the youth to his breast and hugged him with almost rapturous joy.

Then he lifted him tenderly to his broad shoulders, as if to bear him away. Before doing so, however, he turned to thank the rescuer.

Singer Sam had disappeared, having stepped outside to look after the welfare of his beloved guitar, not deeming that his presence would be longer required.

He more than half expected to find it gone, for Mineral Gap was not noted for the honesty of its citizens. But his suspicions had wronged them. The guitar-case was there, just where he had left it. He had no more than had time to ascertain that it was still uninjured, when the rumbling of wheels again drew his attention.

He smiled cynically when he saw that the madame's carriage was returning, and also saw, by the aid of the electric lamps, the madame herself looking out from the carriage in an anxious and inquiring way.

The negro drew the horses in near the curbstone; and the madame, catching sight of the medicine-vender, smiled beamingly.

"My good fellow, beckoning to him, and wreathing her face most attractively. "Will you be so kind as to tell me how the dear little fellow is that we run over a while ago? It was a most untoward accident! It cut me up dreadfully!"

Singer Sam did not notice the coin which she held in the palm of her hand, or he might not have advanced in answer to her summons. Others were crowding around the carriage, too, and he mentally resolved not to be the hindmost.

"He's all right!" he declared, doffing his rusty silk tile, and sweeping it downward in an elaborate bow. "My dear madame, the young'un's as chipper as a medder lark. Had a little bark peeled off a corner of his cranium; that's all. A bottle of my Magic Cure, ma'am, will glue him together in a jiffy. I was just a-lookin' to see if I had a bottle of it with me, and fortunately I have."

He slipped open the guitar-case, thereby disclosing a small package containing a few bottles of his vaunted liniment.

"This world is a world of accidents! When you're up you never know when you'll be down, and when you're down you never know when you'll be up. A fellow may ride on the wave of prosperity to-day, and to-morrow he may be in the bottom of the gutter, with his head bu'sted. So I always carries the truck with me."

All this was said with the most artless simplicity imaginable, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to look at the woes of humanity in that light.

"I am so glad to know that no serious injury was done!" Madame Muriel purred. "I so feared the boy had been hurt beyond recovery."

In making this statement the madame falsified most egregiously. She wished it to be understood that her return to the place was due solely to anxiety, when in fact her anxiety had little, if anything, to do with it. She had come back principally to see and speak to the man whom she believed to be the detective, Benton. She was anxious to meet him face to face, and if possible ascertain if her suspicions were correct.

Although she glanced over the crowd while talking to him, her gaze was fixed chiefly on the street singer; which would be only natural, as her remarks were directed solely to him.

She now for the first time inquired who the boy was, and although Singer Sam could not enlighten her, another spoke up in his behalf:

"It's Cece Marsden, Tom Henderson's chum. The boss give him a pretty heavy lick, but I guess he'll come out all right. Tom's a-gittin' ready to carry him home now."

Tom Henderson was the name Singer Sam had heard applied to the man who had rushed so excitedly and impetuously into the drug-store. The speaker's words caused the singer to turn about; and he now beheld Henderson stepping from the drug-store door, bearing the lad in his arms.

This seemed no task for Henderson, who was herculean in build and strength. The white face of the injured youth looked whiter than ever—decidedly ghastly—under the electric glare.

"My dear sir, allow me to thank you for your kindness!" the madame cried, in a voice loud enough for all to hear. "Truly, you have my heartfelt thanks."

Then, before Singer Sam was aware of her intention, she held a gold coin aloft, and dropped it—not into his hand, for that was not extended, but into his open guitar case. The jingle of it was plainly heard by all.

Before he could protest or attempt to return it, she motioned to the black driver, and the carriage whirled away.

"Ten dollars ahead on that deal, anyhow!"

Singer Sam exclaimed, looking at the coin as if he was not wholly pleased at being the recipient of this bounty. "That woman must have took me for a milyunaire. Money comes tumblin' in to the rich without 'em ever a-tryin' for it; but if the pore man gits a dollar, you bet your boots he's got to hustle! It's the way of the world; and I always was lucky!"

In spite of which, it was plainly apparent that the street singer was not at all glad that the golden eagle had been dropped into his guitar case.

He pocketed the coin with as much *sang froid* as he could muster, closed the case with a snap, and turned toward Tom Henderson, who was at that moment pushing his way through the throng gathered about the door.

Henderson recognized him as he came near, having already heard who was the boy's rescuer, and he stopped for an instant to express his thanks in a few low-spoken words.

"I think I'll go along with you!" Singer Sam asserted, suiting the action to the word. "I've got a little lidiment here that 'll fetch your chum around in a way most beautiful to behold. Likely you've heard of it? It's my Magic Cure. Let me give him a bath of it, and it won't be ten minutes till he'll be singing as lively as a frog in a freshet!"

He shook the guitar box until the medicine bottles rattled, and began to sing, as on the previous night:

"Tis not for your filthy lucre,
Tis not for your tinkling tin;
'Tis not for your ready, your rhino, your stamps,
That I travel this vale of sin!
'Tis the good I can do my fellows!"

"That's just what it is! You wouldn't catch me a-meanderin' over the planet the way I'm a-doin', if I wasn't a-pleasin' myself by bringin' whole chunks of good to whole chunks of people. And for that reason I'm going home with you!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Henderson declared, as he trudged on with his burden. "I can't say that I've got much faith in your truck—beggin' your pardon! but all the same I'm glad to have you go home with us. Cece is all right; or will be as soon as I can git him where I can 'tend to him proper. He could walk now if I was to set him down. But he's shook up a bit; and I can carry him a good deal easier than he can walk."

There was the kindest sympathy expressed in the tone and manner—a sympathy that between these chums seemed more than brotherly; and Singer Sam, as he listened to the words, and watched the big giant as he walked sturdily on, could not but wonder at it.

"Cece and I—I call him Cece, though his name is Cecil—live in an old rookery up here a ways. Hain't much of a place; but you're welcome to it, stranger; as welcome as we are ourselves. Our beds are not of the best, and our cookin' ain't quite so good as you can git at some of these 'way-up hotels; but it's what it is, and as good as we can make it."

The "rookery," as Henderson had termed it, was not far from where the accident had occurred, and it required only a few minutes to reach it. It was a crazy sort of a building, though not what would commonly be called a rookery. None of the houses in the town of Mineral Gap were old enough to deserve that title.

Henderson pushed the door open with his foot, invited his visitor to follow him, and, marching in, deposited Cecil Marsden on a cot in the big front room. Then he struck a light.

He had already given an examination to the young man's injuries, which he now repeated.

There was a dazed look in young Marsden's eyes, as if his mind had not fully regained its balance.

Singer Sam brought out a bottle of his Magic Cure and applied it liberally to the injuries on the young man's head.

It seemed to act as a sleep-producer, for in a short time the youth's deep breathing told that he had dropped into slumber.

"Now, about this woman, whose carriage run over the young chap?" the medicine-vender questioned, as he set the bottle on a shelf for further use in case it should be needed. "That was mainly what fetched me down here—though of course I was anxious to see if the young fellow was bad hurt. I suppose you know the woman?"

He had removed his rusty hat, having deposited it top-side down on the floor, and now looked earnestly at Henderson.

There was at this moment in Singer Sam's countenance an appearance of earnest, though quaint, curiosity. It was such an appearance as might be on the face of one who had been piqued by the gift of the coin and was seeking for a method by which he might repay the humiliating gift with interest.

And this was the turn he really gave to his inquiries.

"You see that?" drawing out the coin, and holding it up for inspection, at the same time explaining how he had come by it. "That there woman knowed I didn't want money for doing a thing like that. Great heavens! Don't my song say that I hain't bankerin' after any truck like this? And she knowed it as well as I do. She didn't give it to me because she

wanted to reward me, but for the effect it would have on the crowd, and on me! Now tell me just who she is, and what she is?"

To Tom Henderson, the request appeared a reasonable one, under all the circumstances.

"Well, she ain't a woman you'd need to be proud of makin' an acquaintance with. She's a fraud of the first water. She calls herself Madame Muriel, and she's a fortune-teller, and I think is the wife of a man known here as Major Dinsmore. Which is the blackest of the two, her or Dinsmore, it would be hard to say. Both of 'em are about as bad as they make 'em. If anything, the woman is the smartest; and, because of that, may be worse than her pardner!"

It was time for Singer Sam's nightly appearance on the street; and, after a few further words, he took his departure, promising to call again to see how Cecil was getting along.

He had obtained the information which he sought in following Henderson home; and as Henderson seemed likely to be a person able to aid him, he resolved to continue the acquaintance so auspiciously begun.

CHAPTER V.

"THE DIVINE DIVA."

SINGER SAM had passed more time at Henderson's than he had been aware of. When he emerged from the building and made his way down the street toward the point where the accident had occurred, he found that the hour was already so late that the crowds of homeward bound men on which he counted for his audience had already disappeared.

Nevertheless, he continued on past the drug-store to the point where he had set up his torch on the previous evening.

He counted on the fact that the workmen would soon return from their evening meals, and that he could then gather them about him without difficulty.

But he was soon made aware that another and greater attraction had been offered to the people of Mineral Gap. That was the singing of Madame Muriel at the "Opera-House."

It was quickly evident that while he would be able to gather a few about him, he could not hope for the crowd he had had on his first night. The majority of those who had then lingered to hear him were already hastening to the hall to hear "the divine diva," as she had been christened in the notices which had been so lavishly distributed about the town, and which had also appeared in staring letters in the one evening paper.

Singer Sam was not all embittered by the fact that the people of Mineral Gap preferred the singing of Madame Muriel to his own. He reasoned, and with much correctness, that they were drawn as strongly by curiosity as by anything else.

Therefore, he blew out the torch which he had lighted, stowed it and his medicine in the store where they had remained during the day, and with his guitar-box under his arm strolled in the direction taken by those who had passed him.

He was as anxious to hear the "divine diva," and to see her, as was any one. More anxious! For none of those who were to listen to her that night could have half the interest in her that Singer Sam had.

When Singer Sam reached the hall, he found it well packed by a surging, noisy crowd. The madame had not counted without knowledge in thinking that her fame as a vocalist would draw the amusement-loving multitude of Mineral Gap. Her singing was not to be the only attraction; but it was what was most anxiously looked forward to.

Singer Sam, gaunt and somewhat stooping, with that ever-present air of decayed respectability, removed his tall hat as he passed through the doorway, and crowded forward to obtain a desirable seat.

These were nearly all taken, but after a time he secured a place near the center of the hall. He had scarcely done so, when another came in and squeezed into a chair at his side. This was Tobe Tinchman.

"I guess I'll have to swear off on singin'," Singer Sam observed, with a tinge of sadness. "This here kind o' business is jist everlastin' rough on the medicine racket. Only had an audience of three boys an' a lame pup out there, and I couldn't afford to waste good truck on a measly pup—and the boys was that healthy they didn't need no medicine. So I thought I'd come up here. When does the divine—er—what-do-you-call-her—begin to sling her music?"

If he knew Tinchman, or had any true idea of the character of the man, he made no sign.

"I don't know jist when she'll begin to splurge!" Tinchman averred, a great admiration for the madame evinced in his tone. "She's a honey, though, when she do git started; an' I know you'll like her."

"By the way, ain't you the feller what pulled the boy out from under the kerridge wheels this evenin'?"

An answer was prevented by the thunder of applause that at that moment shook the house. The curtain had risen, and the divine diva was gliding upon the stage in her most taking way.

Opera glasses were in instant demand, many there being anxious for a closer view of the creature whose beauty had been so highly lauded by the evening paper.

If these were doomed to disappointment, they gave no sign. Behind the footlights, Madame Muriel was really a handsome woman. Her coarseness had vanished in a great measure under deft applications of paint and powder. The harsh lines of her face had been subdued or completely eradicated.

And as for dress! She was a dazzling and bewildering sight. She was clothed in some creamy, sheeny material that set off her plump form to perfection; and her arms and throat, which were bare, had by some skillful treatment changed from their natural reddish tint to an alabastrian whiteness.

In one hand she carried a roll of music, which she contrived to manipulate in a way to add to the general effect of her charms.

The applause was long and continued, as well as deafening; and Singer Sam was given abundant opportunity to closely study the woman who was bowing and smiling before him.

Queer specks of light gleamed within the depths of the pupils of his eyes like points of fire. He never removed his gaze from her, but stared as if desirous of reading her inmost heart.

As for the madame, if she noticed him sitting there, with Tobe Tinchman at his side, there was nothing in her manner to denote it.

"Hain't she a Jim Dandy?" Tinchman whispered, in his coarse way.

There was no reply to this; and Tinchman subsided, as the madame began to sing.

Singer Sam was obliged to confess to himself that Madame Muriel had a full and musical voice. She had selected a catchy piece from an opera popular at the time, and sung it with fire and spirit.

At its close, she received an *encore*, which was repeated, and twice she returned to the footlights, amid the plaudits of the assembly.

But it was all over at last; and when it was known she was not to sing again that night, there was a general stampede for the door, for the performance to follow had grown to be to the *habitués* of the place something of a "chestnut."

At this moment, while all was surging tumult, a cry arose for Singer Sam.

It was started by Tobe Tinchman, and taken up and repeated from lip to lip until the hall fairly rocked with the calls.

The manager of the place made his appearance on the stage; and, rubbing his hands together asked if the gentleman called for would be so kind as to favor the ladies and gentlemen with one of his songs.

Although not visible, the hand of Madame Muriel was back of all this, and directing it. She had her reasons for wishing to see and hear more of the stranger.

Although Singer Sam seemed slightly abashed by this sudden and vociferous demand, he was by no means unprepared for it. He had come there expecting to be called on for something of the kind.

He got upon his feet in response to the manager's invitation, and bowed as politely as the madame had done, to the storm of applause that greeted him.

The people of Mineral Gap, or the portion there represented, were in for a "time" that night, and were bound to have it.

The appearance of the medicine-vender, as he drew himself up in the center of the hall, was provocative of merriment. He was gaunt and ungainly, dressed in a style far from suitable for the occasion, and the dry, half-humorous, half-pathetic look on his face was indescribable.

"Gentlemen," and the medicine-vender combed the fingers of one hand through his scanty beard in a hesitating way, "seems to me it ain't jist the fair thing to call on your humble servant after such a treat o' op'ery as that. Compared with such efforts, my singin' is like the growlin' of a bull-frog alongside of that o' angel voices. Gentlemen, it was scrumptious! Immense! My dictionary hain't got but a few words in it, or I would say more."

"As for me, you know me! If you don't, likely you never will. I don't profess to be anything but a pilgrim and a stranger, tarryin' among you for a night or two—mebbe for a week or two, or longer, if business gits good."

There was a subdued snuffle in his tones that was almost touching, and lifting his hands he seemed to wipe away a tear with one of the hard knuckles.

"Business hain't been good with me lately, though last night I had hopes. To-night, you fellows all come here, an' my hopes took a tumble. So, everything depends. I'm here to-day an' gone to-morrow. But my mission is to do good; and if I can't sell you medicine, I'm willin' to sing you a song!"

He cleared his throat, and turned toward the pianist, who had furnished the accompaniment for the madame's singing.

"I'd ask you to open that there box and bang out a few for me, only that I writ the words and music for this thing myself, and I hain't got 'em nowhere but in my own head!"

With this apology, he drew the guitar from

its box, gave the strings a few preliminary twangs, and was about to sing, when the manager invited him to come on the stage.

"Beggin' your pardon! but them lights would rattle me!" still twanging the guitar. "Besides, I hain't got my stage dress on. Thankee, I think I'd prefer to stand just here!"

Again he swept the strings, the house became quiet, and he sung:

"In the long, long ago—when the world was light and free—

As the mocking birds that warble through the air;—

In a pretty Eastern home, sweet as eye did ever see, There lived and loved a woman, wondrous fair. Her heart it was her husband's, by their children only shared,—

Two babes were these, a bright-faced girl and boy;—

And their life so pure, with Eden can only be compared;

And the passing days were filled with sweetest joy!

"But evil fell upon them—It was a cruel fate! The father passed beyond earth's stormy sea;

And the mother, anguish-stricken, bereft and desolate,

Sobbed out her heart in bitterest agony!

Thus left without protection—the fell despoiler came!

From out their once sweet home those babes were torn,

And, cast upon a dreary world, with but a blasted name,

They wandered from the home where they were born.

"One only now is left;—and far from friends and aid!

Yet the author of this crime holds high his head! And with his hoarded gins covers up the tell-tale stains

Of his wrongs against the living and the dead. Still, a wise God reigns above, and there's good upon the earth,

And as sure as Justice rules the globe around, The right will loudly call, the sword of vengeance fall,

And this monster will be stricken to the ground!"

There was so much weird pathos in the song—such a wailing cadence in the notes, that the vast audience, at its conclusion, sat as if hushed and oppressed by fearful memories. There was no *encore*, nothing but a deep sigh that stirred through the crowd as if a sobbing wind had swept over it. None but a singer of wonderful power, one who had a mastery of all the finer effects to be produced by music, could have so wrought upon that audience. It was an exhibition of the singer's art far superior to anything contained in the operatic trills of Madame Muriel.

The madame was not unaware of this unexpected result of the medicine-vender's effort. The stage curtain was down; but from behind it she had peered, watching the singer with eager eyes, and with strained ears drinking in his every utterance.

If the effect on the crowd was wonderful, that produced on the madame was more so. There had been a half smile on her lips while Singer Sam was twanging his guitar, but this faded away when the song began; and, as the story slowly unrolled in that indescribably affecting way, the change that crept over her features was startling.

A scared, frightened light, came into her eyes, her lips whitened in spite of the rouge which had been so liberally applied to them, and her thinly-clad form shook as if seized with a sudden ague.

She had angled to draw Singer Sam to that place, and in doing so had overshot the mark. She had anticipated nothing like this. Believing that she could force from him some expression or action that would serve to reveal his identity beyond a question, she had not looked for such a revelation.

She crouched there with quivering form and palpitating heart until the last note died away and she was made aware of the impressive stillness that had fallen on the audience. Then she placed her hands upon her ears and buried her face against the stage curtain, as if to shut out all sights and sounds, while she struggled with the tumult that raged in her soul.

She was aroused from this position by a step behind her, and by the noise made by the rising audience.

The step was that of Major Dinsmore. His face was also white and drawn, and his eyes reflected back something of the horror which shone in those of the woman.

"It is he!" she whispered, with a hysterical gasp. "It is Benton! I thought I couldn't be mistaken last night!"

Dinsmore did not at once reply, but drew the curtain slightly and looked out on the noisy assembly, which was already moving toward the door. Singer Sam stood erect, his guitar still in his hands, staring after the retreating crowd in a puzzled manner, as if wondering why he had not been asked for another song.

The manager was before the curtain making ineffectual attempts to stay the moving tide by announcing other attractions to come.

"Yes, it's Benton!" said Dinsmore, turning back to the still-kneeling woman. "And he is here for us!"

CHAPTER VI.

LAURA DUTTON.

MADAME MURIEL sat in her spider-like den, on the following morning, waiting as usual for her prey.

The madame had not regained her customary elasticity. She was moody and depressed. The shadow of something terrible seemed to be hanging over her, which she could not shake off.

She was petulant, also, and fault-finding. The boy who waited upon her and answered the rings at the door, and who had been as regular in his coming as clock-work, was not there; and the madame had chafed herself almost into a fit of nervous prostration because of it.

At any other time, so small a thing would not have disturbed her equanimity. But her nerves were at their highest tension; and it required nothing scarcely, to set them in a flutter.

She had not been able to rid herself of the forebodings produced the previous night by the song of the itinerant medicine-vender. The words, the air, all clung to her with distressing persistence. If she closed her eyes for a moment, the figure of Singer Sam appeared before her, the guitar in his hand, and his voice raised in that dispiriting, wailing song.

"Laura!" she shouted, her voice keyed to an unnatural pitch. "Laura! Come here! That miserable boy has dropped dead on the street somewhere, I guess. I hope he has, at any rate!"

Extreme irritability was manifest in the words.

When Major Dinsmore had stated, two nights before, that the madame's impetuous rush up the stairway made him think one of the servants was coming, he had meant it as a jest. They had no servants, in the ordinary acceptance of that term.

The young woman whom Madame Muriel was now calling could scarcely be said to be a servant; for, although often treated as a servant, and forced to do a servant's work, she was recognized as one of the family.

"Laura Dutton! Are you coming? If you don't hasten your footsteps I shall feel compelled to go after you!"

In response to these repeated summons, Laura Dutton made her appearance.

She had evidently come up from the kitchen, for there were traces of flour on her hands.

In spite of this, however, and the added fact that she was dressed only in calico, Laura Dutton was a pleasing and good-looking young woman. The fresh rosininess of her complexion, the sparkle of her eyes, and the air of bounding health so visible in her, distanced the madame's false color and accentuated pretensions to youth so far that there were no comparisons.

"Here I have been waiting for you an hour!" the madame complained, lying glibly, as she caught the unsuspecting girl by the hair, and gave it a painful tug. "Why don't you come when I call for you?"

Laura Dutton had no reason to fancy the madame's pleasantries, but she was evidently not prepared for so brutal an assault as this.

She was a girl of spirit, too, and the angry color flamed hotly into her face. She removed the madame's hand with much forcefulness, at the same time giving the madame's rotund form such a push that the spiteful woman came near measuring her length on the floor.

"Take your hand out of my hair!" was Miss Dutton's fiery exclamation. "I came as soon as I could—as soon as I heard you!"

"You're a lying little minx!" was the madame's rejoinder. "Go out into the street, will you, and see if that boy is in sight!"

Miss Dutton was about to flounce from the room in high dudgeon, when she was checked by the appearance of Major Dinsmore.

"Major, that girl has been assaulting me!" the madame declared, furious with wrath. "She struck me just now!"

Then, as if anticipating a denial:

"You did, you hateful thing! You did! You did!"

The major lifted his hand as if to strike the girl, but drew back when he observed the unwonted light in her eyes.

Just at that moment it would not have been safe for the major, or the madame, to have tried personal chastisement on Laura Dutton.

"You're an ungrateful hussy!" he asserted, choosing words as his weapons instead of blows. "Is that the way you treat the madame, after all she has done for you—after all I have done for you?"

"You haven't done anything for me!" was the defiant reply. "You make people think you act toward me as if I was one of the family, and yet I'm only a slave here. You owe me more, Major Dinsmore—and so does the madame—than I owe you! And you know it! Both of you!"

Madame Muriel was almost ready to cry from sheer vexation. Major Dinsmore was not given to any weakness so purely feminine. That he felt toward the girl very much as did the madame was shown, however, in the fierce look he bent on her.

"There's to be rebellion in my own house, I see. You are getting to be a very ill-tempered and vexatious creature, Laura Dutton. I can tell you that! And I can tell you more: If it

continues, you will go out of this house, and never set foot in it again!"

This bitter language was hardly justifiable by any past acts of Laura Dutton's. She had really been too meek and too unresentful. Her sudden exhibition of temper that morning was something uncommon—so uncommon that it startled both the madame and the major.

The girl was silent for a moment under the man's threat.

That these two were in a quarrelsome mood Laura could plainly see, and she had no desire to draw down on her devoted head unnecessary wrath.

"You ought to go out of here," the major continued, "for your treatment of the madame last night!"

"What did I do?" in a subdued voice.

The major caught at this change, and thundered scowlingly:

"You had the audacity to withhold applause from the madame last night!"

It was a charge so unjust and so unreasonable! Laura Dutton had listened to the singing at the hall, and had not applauded the madame's trills, an offense, as she now learned, in the eyes of the gallant major.

She did not know that this charge was only a pretext to hang his spite upon. He was coming to hate Laura Dutton, even as the madame hated her.

There was a flash of defiance again in the girl's eyes.

"I did not applaud!" she declared. "And I should not applaud, if it was to do again. If there's any consolation in that, Major Dinsmore, you're welcome to it."

"And you smiled approvingly when that vagabond singer arose!" the madame snapped, viciously.

This was a remembrance hateful to Madame Muriel.

"I did!"

She had drawn herself up to her full height, and now glared defiance at the pair.

"And more: If you want me to go out of this house, I can do it. I don't know where I should go, but I feel sure I could find a home somewhere."

She did not know that this was the last thing they desired her to do; and as the picture of herself, desolate and lonely, wandering the streets of Mineral Gap in search of a home and shelter, rose before her fancy, she could no longer resist the feeling of weakness that was creeping upon her, and dropped into a chair and sobbed.

The madame and the major looked at each other and smiled. It was a victory such as, at the beginning, they had scarcely hoped to win.

Feeling now that they had crushed the girl's spirit, they proceeded to pour out the vials of their wrath on her devoted head; and in much distress and humiliation, after threat had been added to threat, she was remanded to the kitchen.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIRE-EATER OF THE HILLS.

"WELL, dad-gast me! If the gal hain't a-cryin'!"

These were the words which greeted Laura Dutton, as she set foot once more within the kitchen's sacred precincts.

The exclamation came from a blow-hard cowboy known as Jim Bass, who was one of the privileged hangers-on of the place.

The kitchen was one of his favorite lounging spots, for Jim Bass, in the depths of his swelling soul, fancied himself in love with Laura Dutton.

There was no reciprocal attachment, for Laura Dutton was as far removed mentally, and in most other ways, from Jim Bass, as it is possible for such a girl to be.

Still, there were many things to endear him to her, after a friendly fashion. In spite of his pomp of word and manner, his heart was really filled with the kindest of sentiment for her. She knew that he was only deceiving himself in thinking he loved her, and so paid little heed to anything he might say on that subject.

"A-wastin' all of your beauty in tears!" drawing himself up dramatically. "Well, dad-gast me!"

He appeared to be unable to find any other expression sufficiently strong.

Miss Dutton wiped away the tears with a corner of her apron, as she saw Jim Bass standing before her, and caught this repeated exclamation.

"If they's anybody been abusin' of you, jist pint 'em out to me. Jist pint him out, I say! an' I'll perceed to chaw his neck tell he'll think he's been gored by a Texas steer. Jist pint him out to me!"

He advanced as if he meant to place his arm about her in a protecting way; but she eluded the sweep of the arm, and ran laughingly to the other side of the kitchen.

"It was Madame Muriel!" laughing again.

"Well, dad-gast me! Madame Muriel! A feller'd need to have teeth of iron to tackle that creeter's neck! I thought 'twas a man! If it had 'a' been, do you know what I'd 'a' done? I'd everlastin'ly 'a' pulverized him into dust. Ground him to powder! And then—puff—

blowed him away. But the madame! That's a heifer of another pedigree. I'm actually afraid of the madame!"

"If your courage was equal to your word, Jim, you could get an appointment as a major-general," smiling demurely at him. "You're a brave man—in your own estimation."

"Speakin' o' majors," squinting at her, and at the same time putting a big piece of tobacco into his mouth; "the major up there didn't have anything to do with this, now, did he?"

She nodded her head affirmatively.

"I jist knowed he did. I'll be the death of him yit. You tell him so, will you? Tell him that I'm preparin' to lay for him, with a big bowie-knife and six revolvers. An' I'll do it too, if he ever so much as puts the weight of his littlest finger on you."

"Do you know what I come hyer for, this mornin'?"

"I don't know, Jim Bass, and I don't care. Whatever it was, it won't amount to anything. You talk and talk, and that's the end of it."

"I guess you don't know me, yit," dropping heavily into a big chair. "My name's Bass!"

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Did ye ever hear of Sam Bass, the great Texas cowboy? The biggest man in the whole country, from the Red River to the Rio Grande, and from the briny to the Staked Plains! I'm a linyul descendant of his."

"If he could tell bigger fibs than you, he must have been a powerful man!"

"He come to Texas in his youth, a cowboy for to be; A better hearted feller you'd hardly ever see!"

Jim Bass chose to reply to her aspersion with a couplet from his favorite song, a song he never tired of singing, for it was one that recited the interminable and glorious adventures of the man whom he proudly proclaimed as a kinsman—Sam Bass, of cowboy fame.

"That was me uncle," he said, squinting at her again. "You've heered that song?"

"I've heard it till I'm tired. You're in a singing mood this morning. You must have been at the Opera-House last night."

"I'll tell you what!" putting aside an immediate reply to this. "If you'll promise to marry me, I'll go up and whip the major this blessed minute! Dad-gast me, if I don't! What do you say? Maternity and murder! I can do him up inside of ten minutes, an' it won't take more'n a half-hour longer fer us to git hitched. Maternity and murder! What do you say? That would make a beautiful headline for the newspapers to-morrow!"

"I say that you're a fool!"

"Come! Come! Don't be rough on a feller, when his intentions is good. Yes; I was at the Opera-House last night."

"And that's what brought me hyer, though I come near forgittin' it."

The traces of tears had vanished from her eyes, and she now looked at him questioningly, though she only anticipated one of his boastful outbursts.

Before proceeding to further enlighten her, he drew his face into a very wise and knowing expression, and winked most solemnly.

"You heered that song last night? The one slung by the medicine-man! Did it put any new ideas into your furrid, beneath them bangs? If it didn't, you hain't as smart a gal as I've took you to be!"

He looked at the door which led to the stairway and the rooms above, to see that it was closed; and not satisfied with this survey, got up and peeped into the corridor. Then, as if the condensed wisdom of all the ages was resting on his broad shoulders, he hitched his chair close up to the girl's, and whispered hollowly, putting a hand to his mouth to act as a speaking-tube:

"That song had a meanin'. A meanin' higher'n the mountains and deeper than the sea. I saw the madame and the major, after the show was over, and if you'd 'a' saw 'em, you'd 'a' felt jist as I do."

It seemed to please him to make his words and manner as mysterious as possible.

"I heard the song! What was there in it to make such a bugaboo about?"

"That's what I'm a-goin' to tell you. But first! If I bring you a fortune, will you marry me? I allow that will suit you a heap sight better than if I'd immediately perceed to chaw up the major. What do you say? If I bring you a fortune?"

"Jim Bass, what are you driving at?"

"If I bring you a fortune?" he persisted.

"No, not if you bring me a dozen. You don't want me, and I don't want you. You think you do, maybe, but you don't!"

"Hope I may never slay another man if it ain't so! I ain't foolin' about this fortune business, either. It's there, and it's yourn, and I can git it for you!"

"Get it, then! and we'll talk about marrying afterward!"

He drew back with an injured air.

"Tain't every girl would fly in the face of her best interests. A fortune hain't to be sneezed at—especially a fortune like this hyer what I'm a-speakin' of."

"Go on and tell me about it!" impatiently.

"You heerd the song? I s'pose you remember

it? If you do, you'll see that it fits the major and the madame, and you!"

She uttered a little gasp of astonishment, a thing that greatly pleased Bass.

"You've told me more than once that you didn't know where you was born, ner anything about yerself! And hyer you air with the major and the madame, like one o' the fambly, as ye may say! Where did they git you? Where did they git the gobs and gobs o' money that they have? Tell me where?"

He drew back, and impressively shook a forefinger.

"Where?"

"You tell me!" her cheeks aflame. "For I'm sure I don't know!"

"Of course the song didn't tell the hull history of the thing! But the major and the madame, some time or another, managed to get hold of you and of a fortune with you. And didn't do it straight! Did you ever have a brother?"

"I really don't know!" and her face grew uncommonly serious.

"Of course you did! Don't you know the song said: 'a bright-faced gal and boy?' You air the gal, and you've got a bright face, and t'other'n was your brother. And there comes in the song ag'in: 'One only now is left!' Don't you recollect it?"

He was so taken with his subject, and so enthusiastic over his discovery, that he could hardly contain his emotions. His face beamed as redly as the sun at sunset.

"Dad-gast it! There's a fortune there, fer you, Laury. A fortune and a husband. I'll git the one, and you'll git the other—an' in that way, you'll have both! What d'ye say?"

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAIR OF ECCENTRICS.

AN hour later, Jim Bass was peering up a stairway in a business part of the town.

Laura Dutton had not acceded to his desires that they should be married forthwith; but, like the sensible girl she was, had said that if there was a fortune in store for her she would be only too glad to be put in possession of it; and that if Bass could secure it to her, he would earn her undying gratitude. Gratitude was the strongest term she would use in this connection; and, though wholly unsatisfactory to Bass, he was forced to be content with it.

The loud-talking cowboy was really in earnest in his belief that he had discovered the true solution of the medicine-vender's enigmatic and pathetic song.

Bass was not the only man who had thought the song a recital of matters of personal history, of which the singer had some, even if second-hand, knowledge. The very way in which Singer Sam delivered it, tended to this conviction.

Absorbed in this new pursuit, the cowboy had gone direct from the presence of Laura Dutton to search for the singer of the song.

Having caught a distant glimpse of him, he followed him, only to see his swinging coat-tails vanish up this stairway.

Bass looked at the sign above the door. It read:

"PAUL ROSCOMMON,

"Attorney-at-Law."

"I think I know that feller!" squinting up at the sign. "Dad-gast me! Yes! It's the young law-shark that was mixed up in that case down to the court room t'other day. He's as sharp as a brier, too! I wonder, now, what the old psalm-singer wants with him?"

His curiosity was so great he could not hold it in check. He had none of the fine sensibilities of the true gentleman, and hence regarded eavesdropping as a venial offense.

After looking up and down the street two or three times, to make sure no one was coming whose destination might be that office, he slipped up the stairway with cat-like stealth, and applied an eye to the key-hole of Roscommon's door.

Singer Sam was seated in the office, conversing in low but earnest tones with the young lawyer. In spite of this observable earnestness, however, the odd air of quaint simplicity still clung to him.

"I think you understand the case, now," the listener heard him say, "and if you think you can help me, I'm shore I'll be powerful glad of your services. I'm a stranger here, and a pilgrim"—a humorous glance from the eyes—"an' I need a man who knows the ropes of the town."

Roscommon was standing by a desk, placing some papers in a large envelope. This he slipped into his pocket, and took up his hat.

"Scat is the word!" Bass whispered, withdrawing from his position and retreating swiftly down the stairway. "I might 'a' knocked and made him think I was coming to see him on p'tickler bizness of my own!"

The fact, though, that he had not framed any pretext for such a call caused his precipitate flight.

When Roscommon came down the stairway and out into the street, Jim Bass was standing

on the pavement, with his hands thrust deeply into his pockets; and, with mouth half-open, as if he saw him with that instead of his eyes, was professing to be lost in admiration of some horses attached to a carriage near at hand.

Roscommon scarcely gave him a glance, but continued on his way.

He was no sooner out of sight than Bass was again climbing the stairway, this time intent on a bit of conversation with the stranger still in the office.

Having gained the door, he pushed it open, and looked in as if searching for the young lawyer.

"Out, eh? I was jist a-lookin' fer that feller fer to pulverize him! He owes me ten dollars, and not a blamed cent will he pay! Dad-gast him!"

"I say, you're the feller what slung that music at the Opery-House, baint you? Of course, I couldn't be mistaken. Sech a voice! Sech a twang—twangin'!"—holding up his left hand and drawing the fingers of his right across an imaginary stringed-instrument. "It was great!"

A curious smile distorted the face of the medicine man.

"It must have been!" nodding his head affirmatively. "It paralyzed the whole audience. Not one of 'em could so much as cheep, when I set down. No flower! No bouquets! Nothin' but a silence that you could hear from here to the plains. Yes, it was gr-eat!"

"They was that overpowered they couldn't say nuthin'!" Bass protested, sinking into a chair and beaming admiringly on the singer. "Why, dad-gast it, yes! Take my own case, fer instance. I set there, jist a-chokin' with tears, and couldn't say a word. My heart was a fountain and my head a public pump. Never had a thing tech me so in my life!"

A smile that was childlike and bland came to the face of the "pilgrim and stranger." He got up from his chair, squeezed a tear into each eye, and, crossing to where Jim Bass sat, took the hand of the cowboy, and moved it slowly up and down as if the man were indeed a pump and this the pump-handle!

"Stranger! I freeze to you. You're the fu'st man I've met that has seen any beauty in that there piece o' mine. You're the fu'st man! And I spent a month a-constructin' of the words and a-buildin' up of the music. And when I delivered it, it fell like a lot of rotten apples on frozen ground! Plunk! But, sir, you can appreciate genius when you meet it!"

He forced out another tear, gave the pump-handle a final upward and downward movement, and retreated quietly to his seat.

Jim Bass was perplexed. He had hoped to draw the medicine man into a discussion of the song. But he was not to be thus baffled.

"Yes, it was good! Don't think I ever heerd anything gooder! Do you know, now, that I thought that that song wasn't jist quite like other songs. There was a—a—meanin' to it, as you may say! You sung it as if your hull giz-zard was into it. As if yer grandmother, er some of yer friends, had died sudden-like."

"My songs always have a meanin'!" the singer affirmed, hugging one knee with both hands, and rocking himself slowly to and fro. "Always a meanin'. You remember the one beginnin', 'Tis not for your filthy lucre?' That one has a meanin'. I scorn money as the dust under my feet. If I was rich, sir, I'd give away my medicine, free as water!"

"But the other song!" Bass persisted. "It was so real, so mournful! It made the tears run into my boots until I thought my little toes was drowned. Wasn't there a meanin' to it, now?"

"I think I know the very identical chap and the very identical gal that that song was meant fer! I'm a-preparin' to marry that gal, an' I'm a-goin' to murder that chap fer abusin' of her this mornin'! And which his name is Major Dinsmore, and the gal's is Laury—Laury Dutton!"

Singer Sam had good control of his facial muscles, but he could not resist a slight start at Bass's statement.

The cowboy noticed this, and took courage.

"I jist know I'm on the right trail in this hyer bizness!" beginning to boil over with exuberance. "I'm on the right trail, an' I'm a-goin' to foller it to the end. I'm a-goin' to have that fortune fer my future wife, or bu'st my b'iler wide open a-tryin'!"

"A while ago you was a pump, and now you're a locomotive!" the medicine-vender observed, dryly.

"But about this hyer bizness! I know you're after Major Dinsmore, and I'm after a fortune! What's the reason we can't hitch teams? Tie our bronchos together! Two hosses can pull better than one, and the same way with human critters!"

"If they don't pull against each other!"

"Certainly, of course! Dad-gast it, of course! We'd both pull together! That's my idee! What d'ye say? A fortune an' a weddin'! The com-mitter of crime a-dyin' at the stake, with a knife jabbed through his liver. Red lights and slow curtains! 'Twould do for the stage! What d'ye say?"

Bass was working himself almost into a fever of enthusiasm, and it touched him in a tender

spot to observe that Singer Sam did not respond with a fervor equal to his own.

"I hain't sed, yit, that my song had any special meanin'!" still nursing his knee, and giving to his body that melancholy and monotonous swing. "There's crime and sufferin' in this world, an' in that respect the song was truthful. But I hain't confessed that I was a-shootin' at any particular bull's-eye!"

This denial did not satisfy the cowboy. He believed that Singer Sam was indulging in a bit of gentle prevarication.

"You never had sech a chance to git a side-pardner like me!" boastfully. "You don't know me, or you wouldn't put me off that way. I'm a linyul descendant of the original Sam Bass. Jim Bass is my name."

"Very happy to know you, Mr. Bass," again rising and giving the cowboy's hand that pump-handle shake. "Very happy! My name's Sam Johnson. Come around to my singin' to-night, and for fifty cents I'll give you a bottle of medicine that's wu'th its weight in gold!"

Bass scarcely heard these words, so intent was he on making good his own claims.

"Yes, sir; Jim Bass! and if you want a man to cut and carve, to dirk yer enemies and slay your foes, and wade in seas of crimson—in behalf of the right only! Remember that! Only in behalf of the right!—Jim Bass is your man!"

Singer Sam smiled at him from his chair, to which he had once more returned.

"Yes, sir; Jim Bass is your man! For a fortune and a weddin'! I've already entered into a contract to kill Major Dinsmore; and if I add two or three more to the list, 'twon't make any difference!"

He had arisen in his excitement, and was waving his hands by way of emphasis, when the door opened and Roscommon returned.

The effect was like puncturing a wind-bag with a pin. The loud-mouthed cowboy collapsed with startling suddenness, stammered an apology, and picking up his hat hastened from the room.

CHAPTER IX.

A DEVIL'S ATTEMPT.

NOTWITHSTANDING he had been foiled in his effort to draw Singer Sam into a declaration on the subject uppermost in his thoughts, Jim Bass was so taken with the idea that he had hit on the true meaning of the words in the song, that he returned almost immediately to Madame Muriel's kitchen and to his amorous talk with Laura Dutton.

He was as voluble in his threats against Major Dinsmore, but contented himself with stabbing that gentleman at long range; never once thinking of ascending to where he might be found and putting the threats into instant execution.

Laura knew that Bass's vaporings were harmless, and time and again told him so; but this did not stop the boastful flood.

After he had talked the girl "blind, deaf and dumb," as she herself expressed it, he again went into the street in search of the medicine-vender.

He did not find him, but he stumbled upon a piece of information that he deemed somewhat astonishing.

The medicine man had taken up his abode beneath the roof occupied by Tom Henderson and Cecil Marsden; and had, so the information ran, become one of the family.

It was well known how these chums lived, though how such a pair had become attached to each other as chums, was not so well known. Cecil Marsden, because of the weakness produced by his deformity, was not strong enough for manual labor, and so had taken on himself the duties of caring for the house and preparing the meals. Henderson worked in one of the mines; and the money he earned was the support of their joint establishment.

"Tuck the singer in with 'em!" Bass muttered, revolving this piece of knowledge over and over in his mind in an endeavor to extract something from it.

Only one thing was plain; and that was that if he desired to again see and converse with Singer Sam, his chances for so doing would be augmented by haunting this house.

He feared to do so during the light of day; and accordingly postponed his visit to the vicinity until shortly after nightfall.

It would be possible to see Singer Sam on the street, when he made his nightly appearance, but the chance for a talk with him then would not be good. Bass preferred to meet him within the walls of a house, and sit with him face to face, as he had that morning at Roscommon's.

Slipping along in the direction of the crazy building which had so recently become the singer's home, Jim Bass, somewhat to his amazement, saw another form gliding along before him in the same surreptitious way.

The darkness was too dense for him to make out either the form or face; but the fact that the man before him seemed to be using tactics so similar to his own greatly piqued his curiosity.

He feared to reveal himself, for that would be to frighten the unknown from his intentions; and Bass was anxious to learn what those intentions might be.

That the man was going toward the same house could not be doubted, for he had left the street and was headed in that direction, and there was no other house near. He was also taking advantage of some shrubbery to conceal his movements.

"Well, dad-gast me!" giving utterance to his favorite expression. "That jist sticks me in the mud. Can't flounder on to solid ground nowhere. What's the feller a-drivin' at?"

There was a lamp burning within the house, but the light came through one window only faintly. It was observable that the unknown was taking precautions to avoid the rays of this lamp.

Bass quickened his footsteps, though he did not decrease his caution; and succeeded in gaining somewhat on the other. He was not many paces in the rear when the man reached the house.

"I do believe it's Madame Muriel's nigger!" with a low cluck of surprise.

This discovery, if it was a discovery, tended to increase his nervousness, and also his carefulness. It was morally certain, he thought, that Madame Muriel's "nigger" could have no reasonable excuse for so approaching this house.

Even as he looked and wondered, he saw the negro stoop down and disappear beneath the floor.

"Gr-eat Jehoshaphat!"

With this expression of supreme astonishment he darted lightly to the side of the building and peered under it.

He was satisfied the negro was bent on incendiarism; and he half expected to behold a pile of shavings, and the negro with a match lighted ready to touch to them. Instead, he only saw the blackness of utter gloom.

"Couldn't expect to see an Ethiopayan in a hole like that!" was his thought.

He was painfully aware, though, that if he could not see the Ethiopian, it was probable that the Ethiopian could see him.

There might be danger, too; and, slipping back with remarkable agility, he flattened himself on the ground, and at the same time drew out and cocked a big revolver.

"If he makes a dive at me, I'll fill his hide so full of holes that it won't hold shucks!"

In spite of his wordy braggadocio, Jim Bass was by no means the coward one might think. He fought most of his battles with his mouth, it is true; but he had been known to engage in more deadly combats.

He had little fear of the negro, believing that most blacks would run at the first show of peril. Much as he had been about Madame Muriel's establishment, he had yet to come face to face with this sable servitor.

Looking under the house, he could see nothing, hear nothing. Yet he knew the man was there. He had beheld him vanish at that point, and he did not think there was any other way of egress.

With ostentatious deliberation, he loudly clicked the cylinder of his revolver round and round, and called out in a voice that was tremulous, in spite of his efforts at self-control:

"Come out o' there, you black vagabone! Come out; er I'll open on you tell you'll think the very sky is a-rainin' bullets! Hump yerself! If you don't, an' mighty quick, you'll think a volcano is broke loose!"

He was surprised at the result of his demands.

Almost before he had time to think, the negro made a lunge at him. The black had not been two feet from him during all this time; and, seeing that discovery was inevitable, was determined not to be taken without an effort.

Jim Bass dropped his revolver, and tumbled back with a howl. The very suddenness of the assault quite unnerved him. Nevertheless, he made a grab for the negro, thinking to hold him until his shouts should bring help.

The negro was carrying a bundle, which he now let fall for the purpose of being better able to defend himself. He wrenched himself from the cowboy's grasp, delivered a heavy blow, and darted swiftly away in the darkness.

Bass fell backward again, bellowed with pain, for the negro's hard fist had caught him full in the stomach.

As soon as he could sufficiently recover his breath, he sent up a number of additional howls, which had the effect of summoning the inmates of the house.

Henderson was the first to reach him. He bore a lamp in his hand.

"What's the matter, here?" he inquired.

"Had the dad-gastest fight on record! Knocked the feller clean out of time; and then he got away from me! If you'll hunt around hyer, I think you'll find about three-fourths of his scalp, an' the hull of his clothing. I heerd somethin' drop, anyhow!"

He had scrambled to his feet, and was now facing Henderson, panting and very much excited.

Cecil Marsden was at Henderson's heels, and behind him Singer Sam. These crowded closer to the exclamatory cowboy.

"Who was it?" Henderson and Cecil asked, almost in a breath. "What was he doing here?"

"Now you've got me! I think I know who he was, but it hain't safe to say what he was a-

doin'. I think, though, he was a-tryin' to burn yershebang!"

He threw himself back with great dignity, thrusting his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest and extending the fingers outward.

"I'm of the p'inted opinion that if I hadn't come jist when I did all three of you fellers would be a-roastin' now, like so many thanks-givin' turkeys. He had his match lit, and everything all ready. Shouldn't be surprised if you'd find a can of kerosene under there!"

There is no telling how long these puffing declarations might have continued, for Jim Bass dearly loved an appreciative audience. He was even willing to forego the gratification of his curiosity, for the pleasure of it. But Henderson cut him short by pushing the lamp toward the building, and commencing a search.

A chorus of indignant astonishment arose. The lamp-light revealed some mysterious-looking packages on the ground. There was also a short length of fuse.

"It seems more like some one had been trying to blow us up!" Henderson declared, picking up these articles and closely examining them.

"'Twas the nigger!" Jim Bass exclaimed, unable to longer withhold this information.

"'Twas Madame Muriel's nigger. Sech a fight as I had with that feller! See if you can't find a piece of burnt match around there somewhere. He had it lit!"

Henderson was handling the packages very gingerly, not knowing what they might contain. Bass's statement that Madame Muriel's negro had been at the bottom of the attempt came as a surprise to him, though it was not a surprise to Singer Sam.

With a keen-bladed knife, Henderson cut the cords and removed the paper from the packages. Enough blasting powder was revealed to have wrecked the building and blown its inmates into eternity.

The four looked at each other with scared, pallid faces. The attempt had been so dastardly that words could not be found to fitly characterize it.

Jim Bass came to the rescue, however. He could always find words for anything. And now that they were inclined to listen to his tragic story, he drew it out in full. He amplified every detail, and worked his imagination to its greatest extent.

If there had been one there who was not familiar with Bass's weakness, that individual's blood would have been made to run cold. But Bass was too well known in Mineral Gap to have any of his utterances taken literally.

"Come into the house, and we'll talk it over!" said Henderson, leading the way, and thus cutting Bass short in the midst of his most thrilling episode.

This suited the cowboy. It would give him a good opportunity to dilate at still further length on his terrific fight with Madame Muriel's negro; and he might also obtain a chance to broach to Singer Sam the subject that had brought him there.

CHAPTER X.

DINSMORE'S WILES.

AN hour later, Jim Bass, with his big revolver again bulging in his hip pocket, was on his way back to Madame Muriel's establishment.

The result of the conference held at Henderson's was that nothing was to be done openly, for the present, at least, in regard to the negro's diabolical act.

Bass was in great good humor. The result of his interview with Singer Sam had been partially satisfactory, though he had not been able to worm any admission from the medicine man. He had been given to understand, though, that Singer Sam expected to direct some heavy blows against the madame and the major. This accorded with the theory that Bass had worked out, and so satisfied him of its correctness.

He made his way into the kitchen of the house as usual, but instead of finding Laura Dutton there, he encountered Major Dinsmore.

The cowboy was filled to bursting with his desire to narrate to Laura his late exciting adventures. To have his volubility thus repressed hurt him.

"I was just thinking of you," the major said, looking at him in his bland, oily way.

"Oh, you was, was you? You couldn't 'a' found anything better to think of. You hain't driv that gal away by any o' your abuse, now, have you?"

He bristled aggressively and dropped a hand to his hip pocket.

The major laughed sarcastically.

"No, I haven't done anything of the kind. Likely she's gone down to hear the medicine man."

"'Cause if you had, I'd feel under obligations to put a bullet into you. That gal belongs to me, Major Dinsmore, and don't you fergit it! An' I don't 'low nobody to go to puttin' a rough hand on her. You hear me!"

The major paid no heed whatever to these frothings.

"I wanted a talk with you," as coolly and unconcernedly as if Bass had not been threatening him. "Come up to my room, will you, where we won't be in any danger of being overheard?"

"I nacherly chawed up one man to-night, and I'm jist in the mood to chaw up another. If you've got bizness with me, major, well and good; if you hain't—why, I'm a-goin'!"

He was aching to have the major question him concerning the particulars of his great fight.

The major saw this, and humored him by an inquiry.

"Mum's the word, major! I can't say more. But sech a fight I don't think you ever *did* see. If I wasn't bound by the interests of certain pa'tic'ler friends to say nothin' about it, I'd be delighted to tell you the whole story. But, dad-gast me, it was a fight!"

Dinsmore's only response was a dry smile, as he turned to lead the way from the kitchen. He felt pretty sure that it would require but little asking to extract from Bass the whole account.

When they were once seated in the quiet of the upper room, the major, having closed the doors carefully, drew his chair close up to that of the cowboy.

"I want to talk to you about this Singer Sam!"

Jim Bass could hardly choke down his surprise.

"You would like to make a little money?"

Dinsmore felt sure he had thoroughly acquainted himself with Bass's character, and thus feeling he was proceeding to sound him. He did not, however, know Bass so well as he thought.

"Money is the staff of life!" the cowboy affirmed, nodding his head sagely. "I don't keer for it, though, as much as I used to. The truth is, major, I'm a-fingerin' on a fortune. A bu'stin' big fortune! As big as yours, I think!"

Even at this stage of the game he could hardly resist the temptation to tell Dinsmore that it was his fortune he was counting on.

"I'm sorry you've lost your love of money!" looking at him keenly. "But a fortune in prospective isn't half as good as a lot of hard cash right in the pocket. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, you know!"

"I'm a-feelin' pretty comfortable, major, 'specially after knockin' that feller out to-night! An' the fortune's a-comin'! Still, a little o' the yaller right now mightn't be so bad!"

"I thought as much!" dryly. "I never took you for a regular idiot, Bass. The whole world wants money; and the majority of people are scheming to get the most of it in the shortest time; and they don't care very much how they get it!"

He was keenly observant of the cowboy's features while speaking.

"This man, Singer Sam, imagines that he has a grievance against me. It is all imagination, however. I met him once, some years ago, and we had a little trouble over a debt he owed me. But the trouble with the fellow is that he is more than half crazy. He really ought to be in a lunatic asylum, instead of being allowed to parade over the country.

"No doubt you have noticed him yourself, and observed what a queer fellow he is in every way."

Bass had had splendid chances to note the singer's eccentricities. For a wonder, the cowboy was silent. His mind was too much occupied with the suggestions forced by the major's words.

Dinsmore marked this; and, putting his own construction on it, hurried to the point at which he was aiming.

"The fellow saw me on the street yesterday, and the sight of me acted like water to a victim of hydrophobia. I'm afraid of him, Bass, and that's the truth of it! His crazy notions will lead him to kill me, sooner or later."

The major's pretense that Singer Sam was little short of a madman did not deceive the cowboy. Bass saw that in one respect Dinsmore spoke truly. He was afraid of the medicine-vender—not because the medicine-vender was an irresponsible lunatic, but for quite another reason.

And that reason, Bass was confident he knew. It was another prop to his theory. Dinsmore and Madame Muriel were withholding from Laura Dutton a fortune that rightfully belonged to her, and Singer Sam had come to Mineral Gap for the purpose of righting this wrong. There were many gaps in this theory which Bass could not fill, but he believed he had seen enough already to prove its correctness.

"What is it you want me to do, major?" breaking what was for him a very long silence. "An' what is they in it?"

"I want you to rid me of this fellow in some way," looking at him with a covertness that was suggestive of murder. "I don't care what you do, nor how you do it. I don't like to put a proposition of this kind into plain words; and I think, Bass, you will understand why. This man is a menace to me. He threatens my life! Why should I care for his?"

The cowboy could no longer have any doubt as to Dinsmore's meaning. The wily major, too shrewd or too cowardly to himself seek the life of Singer Sam, hoped to hire Bass to do the villainous work for him.

A strange, crafty expression came into Bass's face; such an expression as was not often seen

there. He nodded his head vigorously to indicate that no further words were necessary to let him know what was wanted.

"What's the amount, major, spot cash?"

"If you do the thing satisfactorily," leaning forward with a wolfish gleam in his eyes, "so that no evil consequences will follow it, I'll pay you five thousand dollars!"

Brought face to face with this new temptation, Bass seemed a changed man in many respects.

"I'm yer man, major!" whispering the words. "Five thousand ain't to be sneezed at, even when a feller is looking for a fortune by-and-by. It'll hold me up till the fortune comes. How shall I go about this bizness? Dirck him, shoot him, or pour hot lead into his ears?"

He seemed to be recovering something of his old spirit, as the last question indicated.

"I'm not caring. Take my advice, though, and don't bungle the thing. Likely, the safest plan would be to draw him into a quarrel. Then you could put up the plea of self-defense, and in that way get out of the thing without any trouble."

"But the five thousand! How am I to know that I will git it?"

"Isn't my word good? You'll have the thing all in your own hands. I won't dare to go back on you, for you could turn around and blow on me."

"And on myself, at the same time! You know I couldn't do that, major. 'Twouldn't be no satisfaction to me to put some other man's neck into a halter, if I had to put mine in too."

Callous and rascally as Dinsmore was, he winced under these words. He had thought to overreach the cowboy in this matter.

"You have as much security as I have!" he protested. "If I pay you the money now, or part of it, how am I to know you will carry out your agreement?"

"Give me a hundred down, major—jist a hundred, an' this warbler is a dead man!" something of his old bravado reasserting itself. "Yes sir, he's a dead man. A hundred, in cold cash!"

He did not ask for more, believing that if he did so he would not get anything. He had no notion of carrying out his part of the contract. He would not have done so, even if he had had no plans of his own concerning Singer Sam. In thinking the cowboy could be hired to commit murder, the major had fallen into a grievous error.

Jim Bass's many boasts had led Dinsmore into this false estimate. Any one giving credence to Bass's frothy statements would inevitably be led to think him a regular fire-eater—a man who would not hesitate to slay another at the drop of a hat. Like many a man who has a reputation on the border as a "killer," the cowboy's claim to such a distinction rested only on puffery.

Dinsmore arose; and, going to the draw, took therefrom a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill, and placed it in the cowboy's hand.

"There!" he said. "When the work is done, come to me for the balance, and you shall have it!"

"He's a dead man, major!" stuffing the bill into a pocket, and rising to leave. "You may bank on me!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE EXPLOSION IN THE MINE.

It was wonderful how firmly Singer Sam attached himself to Tom Henderson and Cecil Marsden in the short time since making their acquaintance. The acquaintance had been made under very favorable circumstances; and in such cases friendship is often a plant of quick growth.

There was much to admire in Henderson and Marsden. The former was a strong, sturdy, right-minded and open-hearted fellow, whom to know was to like and respect. And in the character of Cecil Marsden there was much to draw out one's kindest feelings.

Cecil was not only bright of face, but bright of intellect, keen-witted and glib of tongue. He was usually silent in the presence of strangers, but his backwardness vanished when among friends. His presence in the house was like sunshine;—it warmed and cheered.

One quickly forgot the appearance of deformity, and saw only the winsome and intelligent face.

Cecil's injuries had not been of a serious character. The nervous shock was felt the longest. But he was now quite recovered from all of it.

Henderson was absent from home throughout the day, with the exception of a short interval at dinner. He was employed in the Calumet coal mine, one of the largest at Mineral Gap.

Coal mining was not the only mining done there. It was really of secondary consideration. The sudden growth of the place had been caused by the discovery of rich silver ore. But the coal industry was important, and employed many hands.

Three days after Singer Sam became a member of the Henderson household, if this term is

allowable, Henderson met with a startling and perilous experience.

The danger surrounding their new friend was already beginning to hang like a shadow over Henderson and Marsden; and it may have been because of this that Henderson was reluctant to leave home for the mine, that morning.

That there may have been other causes for this feeling of uneasiness on the part of Tom and Cecil will be seen in the further progress of this story.

Henderson came to dinner, and returned to his work, without meeting the medicine-vender.

"Be watchful! Be careful!" was Cecil's imploring caution, as this big protector of his was again about to leave the house. "You know how uneasy I am all the time!"

Why uneasy he did not say. Henderson seemed to understand the reason, without any explanation.

Henderson was employed in a long "drift" that extended at right angles away from the main tunnel of the mine; and that evening when he returned to the shaft to ascend, he found himself a few minutes late. The cage, or elevator, by which the ascent from and descent into the depths was made had just descended.

He knew, however, that the car would soon descend. There were two other men still in the mine, he believed, belonging to the day shift; and it would not be long until the descent of the night force. He even looked for the coming of a portion of these with the next descent of the car.

It came down empty, though; and not willing to wait for the appearance of those still in the mine, he entered the car and gave the signal to hoist.

It had not ascended a dozen feet—in fact, seemed to have just got under way—when a terrific explosion occurred.

It came with such stunning suddenness and force that Henderson was for a time blinded and almost paralyzed. The light in his miner's lantern was extinguished, the ascending car received a check, and he was thrown down with much violence.

A dull, heavy crushing pain in one shoulder appeared to benumb that side of his body.

As soon as his mind cleared a little, some idea of what had occurred came to him. There had been an explosion in the mine, not far from the shaft; and it must have been tremendously destructive.

He felt around the interior of the car with the hand of the uninjured arm, and convinced himself that the shaft had become bulged or warped, and that the car therefore could be moved neither up nor down.

This knowledge was not reassuring. It seemed certain that the cage must remain there for an indefinite period. He feared he could not extricate himself from his unpleasant position, and that it would be impossible for the men above to reach him. He saw no way by which he might get out through his own exertions. There was a sheet-iron hood above the car, which he could not remove and had no way to perforate. It was impossible to get out at either side, or at the bottom, and so descend into the mine.

Even in the midst of these reflections, and in spite of the pain and personal discomfort he was suffering, he still had time for a thought for the men still in the mine. Had they been killed by the explosion? Perhaps they were cooped up in some drift by a mass of debris, and were even in a worse condition than himself.

The explosion had disabled or destroyed the ventilating machine, he was certain; and the air within the cage and shaft was already becoming foul.

He was sure the mishap was known above. It might be barely possible for him to be reached and rescued within a short time. Unless the shaft was too badly bulged above the cage, he might be reached from that direction. There was another way into the mine, by means of a shaft located some distance away. Long galleries connected the two portions of the mine; and if the entrance was effected in this roundabout way he would be forced to wait a considerable period for relief.

He was not especially frightened at his position at first, but as the slow-moving minutes crept by without bringing assistance, he began to realize the extent of the peril to which he might be subjected by the delay. The impurity of the air was steadily increasing.

The news of the disaster at the Calumet Mine flew like wild-fire through the streets of Mineral Gap. It was not long in reaching Cecil Marsden, who was at the moment perched before the big cook-stove supervising the preparation of the evening meal.

This interesting work was instantly forgotten; and, hatless, he ran from the house, leaving the bread to burn to a cinder in the oven and the eggs to crisp into an indigestible mass.

He found the streets already well filled with hurrying people—with miners, miners' families and their friends and acquaintances. The rumor had got abroad that the entire night-shift had been in the mine at the time of the explosion and were now imprisoned there.

Hence there were many terrified and tear-stained faces in the throngs that were rushing along the streets.

Queries as to how the accident had occurred passed from lip to lip, and the wildest and most astounding theories were afloat. Some said the mishap was due to "damp," and others to the ignition of a vast quantity of blasting powder.

None knew; and Cecil Marsden, as he hurried on at his best gait, paid little heed to these wild conjectures. He had been told that Tom Henderson was among those imprisoned in the depths, and every thought and feeling was centered in the intense anxiety and alarm which he felt for the safety of his chum.

When he arrived at the shaft, he found that a party had already gone to the entrance to the other portion of the mine, from which they expected to make their way to their imprisoned comrades.

It was not certainly known now, who was in the mine. It had already been made plain that the night-shift had not descended; and the greater number of the day-shift had already reported.

Filled with the hope that Tom Henderson might be among those who had come up earliest, the boy looked everywhere for him, hastening hither and thither with his rapid inquiries.

Henderson was not there. No one had seen him; and, to one so well acquainted with him as Cecil Marsden, this was proof positive that he was still in the mine.

Henderson, in the iron cage far down the shattered and bulged shaft, could not know what was occurring above—what steps were being taken to save the lives of those below.

Some sense of feeling returned to the injured hand and arm, and he could even use them a little; though from the peculiar sensations in his shoulder he believed it to be badly crushed.

What distressed him most, now, was the steadily perceptible increase in the foulness of the atmosphere. A dull, throbbing pain affected his head, seeming to extend down his spine, and spells of giddiness came to him; the frequency of these increasing.

Although but a short time had really elapsed since the explosion, he felt he had surely been hemmed in there an hour. And he reasoned that if assistance could not reach him in an hour it was not likely to reach him in time to be of any value. The vitiated atmosphere would destroy his life before aid came.

He was not disposed to complain, being reasonably sure that everything was being done that could possibly be done. But his impatience and anxiety, combined with the great fear that now assailed him, engendered a condition of panic.

The thought occurred that he might be able to force a way through the hood over the cage; and then work, by some means, to the top of the shaft.

With this in view, he took up the pick in his strong hand—there had been one of these tools in the cage when he entered it—and with this he assailed the sheet-iron of the hood. It was not easy to reach it and make his blows effective, especially in his weakened condition; but after a time he succeeded in driving the point of the pick through the thin iron.

This he repeated a number of times; and by continually battering and beating at the hole, enlarged it sufficiently to admit the passage of his body.

There was one good accomplished by these exertions. They gave direction and employment to his mind.

He fancied he could breathe easier with this hole in the roof of the cage; and was casting around for a way by which he might climb out, when the flashing of lights above drew his attention. Words, also, floated to him.

These were the first sights and sounds to greet him, and they brought new hope and inspiration. He had not been forgotten and forsaken! These were friends coming to help him.

He did not know until later against what difficulties those above had contended. There had been a blocking of the mouth of the shaft, which accounted in a large measure for the foulness of the air which Henderson had felt.

When the obstruction had been removed, and the way down the shaft once more made clear, a small cage had been rigged; and this, swinging independently like a suspended basket, was what Henderson now saw descending toward him.

There were faces looking over the sides of the basket-like cage, and lights were flashing from it.

Henderson sent up a great shout of exultation and joy; and this, with his features revealed by the lights—for he had drawn himself up to the opening in the hood—brought forth answering cries and cheers.

And when the honest miner saw Cecil's face among those peering down at him, his joy knew no further alloy.

CHAPTER XII.

SUSPICIOUS INDICATIONS.

"P'INTEDLY, gentlemen, I think I know who done it!"

Jim Bass had but recently come from the street into Henderson's house, and was now addressing

his words to Henderson and Cecil, and to Singer Sam.

Henderson was in bed, propped into an easy attitude with some bulky pillows. He was resting comfortably.

Not many hours had elapsed since the great explosion in the Calumet Mine. Much of the wreck and debris had already been cleared away, and the work of restoring the shaft to its normal condition was already in progress. The two miners had had a narrow escape, their principal danger having been suffocation. They had been in a "drift," where they were blocked in, and from which they had been rescued by the men who went down the other shaft.

How the explosion had occurred was not yet known, and it was to this point that Jim Bass was directing his talk.

"Gentlemen, I know who done it!"

An expression of owlish wisdom overspread his features, as he made this assertion and looked from one to the other to see how it would be received.

"Knowledge is power!" the medicine man observed, dryly. "It is the only thing that makes the czar of all the Rooshias wiggle on his throne at this blessed minute. If you've got a knowledge of this thing, my good friend, you're in a condition to do something, and confer an unmixed blessing on mankind by tellin' of it."

Bass bent forward and whispered solemnly:

"It was Madame Muriel's nigger!"

Henderson laughed, and from his position among the pillows replied:

"Since Bass's encounter with that individual here, he's inclined to think the nigger guilty of all the meanness done."

"Not a bit of it!" Bass protested. "I know what I'm a-talkin' about. 'Twas Madame Muriel's nigger; an' I can prove it to you!"

Again he looked about, thinking to discover evidences of a sensation.

"Madame Muriel and Major Dinsmore has got it in fer our good friend hyer," nodding toward Singer Sam. "You believe that Madame Muriel has, from what you already know. Didn't she send her nigger hyer with instructions to blow him sky-high? Of course she did!"

He drew out a wallet, and with slow and pompous deliberation drew therefrom a crisp one-hundred dollar bill—the very bill given him by Dinsmore.

There was a sensation, sure enough, when the eyes of the trio fell on this bill. If all reports were true, it was not often Jim Bass had so much money.

"You see that there?" winking slyly and smoothing out the bill on his hard palm. "It's a beauty, hain't it? It's been so long sence I've seen a new bill with them figers on it that I'd nearly fergot how one of 'em looked. There she is! A hundred dollars! An' it was give to me by Major Dinsmore as part of a five-thousand I'm to get fer layin' out our good friend."

Again he indicated the medicine-vender.

A flush of indignation came into Bass's face.

"Gentlemen, I'm pore! Porer than ever Job's turkey was in his wust days. But I don't go around a-killin' people fer money! The major thought I did, and there's where he made his mistake!"

"I've laid out a good many men in my time," the old braggart air returning, "but I always done it fair and square. Yes, sir; whether 'twas pistols er knives, er whatever it was that the fightin' was done with, there wasn't any sneak-in' about it. I never drove a knife into a man's back yit, and I don't 'low to!"

Bass had taken ample time to consider the matter before determining to make this revelation.

"When was this?" Henderson asked. "This offer! When was it made to you?"

His manner was intensely earnest. He had fancied himself prepared for almost any revelation concerning Dinsmore, but he found that he had not been prepared for this.

"The same night that the nigger tried to blow up yer shebang. I reckon the failer of the nigger was the cause of it. I've figgered over the thing a good deal, and this is the way I make it out:

"When I pulled my gun on that black scoundrel that night, an' he jumped out at me an' we had that awful fight, he didn't know who I was. Either that, er Madame Muriel never told the major that she had sent him. I reckon if the major had knowed that 'twas me that come so near a-killin' the nigger at that time, he wouldn't have never approached me at all.

"But he didn't know it, an', reckonin' that I was somethin' of a fighter, he made me this offer:

"He come to me, the major did, an' asked me to his room. Then he says, says he: 'Bass, put this hyer Singer Sam out o' the way an' I'll give you five thousan'!' an' he give me this bill; and he's to pay me the balance when the job's done."

He smiled oddly and boastfully, and with a tug drew out the big revolver. This he laid across his lap, pointing it in the direction of the medicine man.

"Five thousand is a purty big sum. I don't

reely know whether you're wuth that much er not. Is life wuth five thousand to you? Is it wuth the half of it? If it tain't, I'll perceed to blow the top o' yer head off, and we'll make an even division of the pay. 'Twouldn't likely do you much good, but you could pass it over to yer heirs. There ain't many men that's wuth the half of five thousan' that hain't got somebody a-wishin' they was dead, so that they could git the swag. Likely you've got some of them kind of relatives!"

"How many times do I have to say that I'm a pilgrim and a stranger?" was Singer Sam's pathetic protest. "Put up that gun, will ye? It might go off an' hurt somebody. I don't want you to draw five thousand on an accident insurance like that."

With seeming reluctance the cowboy put the weapon away.

"I'm a-gittin' away off my p'int. I was a-talkin' about this hyer mine bizness, and a-sayin' that Madame Muriel's nigger caused the explosion! He tried to cause one hyer, which makes me shore of the one at the mine."

"I was a-talkin' to our singer friend t'other day, givin' him my opinion 'bout several things!"

"You an' him—all three of you—air pardners now, I understand?"

He looked from one to the other as if hesitating to proceed.

"Go on!" said the medicine-vender, encouragingly. "You hit bed-rock that time. We three air pardners; an' I reckon what's good enough for one to hear is good enough for the others. Whats'ever you have to say to me can be said before them. Outsiders, however, strictly excluded."

He had for some time been paying close attention to that bit of the exterior of the building visible by the lamplight from where he sat. He now got up, took a short turn of inspection about the yard, came in again and closed the door.

Jim Bass, who had been watching him intently, now proceeded.

"There's a gal up at the madame's that I'm a-goin' to marry purty quick. If I had that five thousand I'd marry her to-morrow. I've reckoned that that gal has got a fortune comin' to her. It's now in the hands of the madame and the major, and they are withholding it wrongfully from her, and a-deceivin' of her. Our friend hyer, the singer, knows all about it, fer I took pe'tickler pains to acquaint him with the facts the other day."

"He's hyer, our friend is," again nodding toward the medicine-vender, "fur the purpose of gittin' that identical fortune from these people, an' turning it over to the gal that expects to be my wife. He won't say so in jist that many words; but that's what he's hyer fer an' I know it."

Nothin was more manifest than that Jim Bass was pleased with the close attention he was receiving. To have a story to tell and some one to drink it in greedily was the great pleasure of his life.

"An' they know it, too!" he went on. "The madame and the major both know he's hyer fer that reason, jist as well as I do. That's why the nigger come down hyer to blow him up, not keerin' how many others he blowed up at the same time!"

"But he wasn't in the mine!" Henderson expostulated.

"No, but one of his pardners was. You needn't tell me that them two don't understand this pardnership bizness that you've gone into jist as well as I do. You can't keep anything away from them. The madame's ability in that line is what makes her sich a tarnel success as a fortune-teller."

"They'll be after you, then, for what you're now sayin'!" Cecil suggested, with one of his rare smiles.

"I know they will," dropping a hand to the big revolver, "an' I'm ready fer 'em."

"They knowed that Henderson was the singer's pardner, an' fer that reason they proposed to do him up. That's my idee; an' you'll find it'll work out right!"

An intensely thoughtful look had come into the face of Tom Henderson. He glanced meaningfully at Cecil, and then at Singer Sam.

The latter arose, drew up his lank form, and reached for his hat.

"I can't agree with all my friend says, though I must say he's been dropping some chunks of solid wisdom. The thing will bear investigatin', an' I'm a-goin' to investigate it."

He stepped toward the door, without asking Bass to accompany him, a proceeding the latter did not relish.

Then he was gone.

From the home of Henderson and Marsden, Singer Sam went direct to the Calumet Mine.

The night-shift had been long at work, having been let down as soon as a fair degree of ventilation could be established; and work on the repairs was progressing.

Without much difficulty, and under the reasonable plea of curiosity, he was permitted to descend into the mine.

The cage at the first shaft was not running. Therefore, he was forced to descend the other

shaft and make his way through the winding galleries to the point he wished to visit.

There were many suspicious circumstances tending to corroborate Jim Bass's theory.

The first and principal of these was that Major Dinsmore had an interest in the Calumet Mine. Very likely Bass did not know this, or he would have incorporated it in his statement. But Singer Sam became aware of it soon after reaching the town. Not accidentally, but because he had made it his business to examine closely into Dinsmore's affairs.

Bass was not far wrong in some of his ideas. As has been already shown, by the fears and conversations of the madame and the major, Singer Sam had come to Mineral Gap for the purpose of investigating some criminal matters with which they had been connected. Hence, the negro's attempt; and, according to the cowboy's belief, this explosion in the mine.

On reaching the place where the explosion occurred, Singer Sam set himself to make as though an examination of the matter as he could, by inquiry and otherwise.

He soon learned that the general theory was that a quantity of blasting powder had been carelessly lying at that point, and by some means had exploded.

This did not satisfy him; and after much scraping and raking about in dirt and refuse, he came upon a piece of wire. He caught it up with an air of triumph; and, approaching one of the workmen, inquired innocently what such wire was used for in the mine.

The man's reply confirmed his first impression. No such wire was made use of there.

"Aha!" he muttered, thrusting the wire into his pocket and turning away. "It's as I thought. The blasting powder was put there purposely, and was fired by means of this wire an' an electric battery!"

CHAPTER XIII.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

WHEN Major Dinsmore entered into his murderous contract with Jim Bass and advanced the hundred dollars as part payment, he believed that Bass would take the first opportunity of drawing Singer Sam into a quarrel, that he might shoot him.

The night and a day went by, however, without anything of the kind occurring, and he began to doubt if the cowboy really intended to make good his boasts.

He spoke to Madame Muriel of what he had done, and immediately drew down on his devoted head her severe censure and wrath. She made his head to whirl and his ears to tingle with the storm of her denunciations. He was a fool, she assured him! He would bring about the ruin of both!

Another day went by, and still no news came that Bass had accomplished his work. Dinsmore diligently scanned the papers, reading with avidity the accounts of the street brawls, but neither Bass nor Singer Sam was mentioned in them. It was plain that the fire-eater had proved recreant.

In this state of mind he betook himself for counsel and assistance to Tobe Tinchman.

Tinchman was not an adept in the fine art of committing murder without bringing danger to himself, but Dinsmore had always found him level-headed; and, what was more to the point, unscrupulous.

For a consideration, Tinchman agreed to undertake what Jim Bass had failed to do; and in the performance he purposed to use craft.

Just what course he should pursue he did not for a time know. What seemed an accident gave it direction. He saw, or believed he saw, Singer Sam enter the cage and descend the shaft of the Calumet Mine. One of his confederates was near, and he stationed him there to watch for the medicine man's reappearance. Another confederate he sent to the other shaft, intending to make sure that Sam did not come out of the mine without his knowledge.

Then he hastened away for a short conference with Dinsmore.

He found the major fertile of resources, filled with expedients.

Within a few moments he was hastening back, a large spool of wire and a small storage battery stowed away beneath his coat. He succeeded in entering the mine with these without detection. He was not observed in the darkness below; and after the explosion, as we have seen, his absence was not noted.

He had left word with the confederate at the other shaft to notify him in the event that the man he sought ascended by that way. The long hours glided by and no such notification came. Neither did the medicine man ascend at the point he was watching.

It scarcely seems necessary to add that Tinchman was laboring under a mist ke. When he thought he saw Singer Sam enter the mine he had been deluded.

The opportunity for which he had been waiting and watching finally came. He succeeded in obtaining possession of a large quantity of blasting-powder, which he concealed under a lot of refuse near the bottom of the shaft. The darkness, so constant and intense down

there, aided him in his movements. He then grounded his wire and formed a circuit, and so attached it to the powder and to the battery that only a touch was necessary to fire the explosive.

The wire he trailed away into the depths of mine, covering it to prevent its detection; and, when he was satisfied that all was in readiness, he placed the battery in position in a cave-like niche, and hastened back to where he could observe the bottom of the shaft.

He was uneasy, nervous, and laboring under much excitement. If his scheme should fail, or be detected, he would be perilously situated. In such an event, could the influence of the major save him from just punishment? He endeavored to comfort himself in the belief that it could; but in spite of all, his doubts would occasionally rise to an alarming extent.

He saw the day-shift ascend, and wondered what could cause Singer Sam to so delay his coming.

Then with quick steps Tom Henderson came through the gloom and entered the cage. It seemed strange that Tinchman should make so great an error. But when he caught sight of Henderson he felt sure he saw Singer Sam, and ran back to the battery.

The explosion instantly followed.

The result was wholly unlooked-for, even by Tinchman. He had not correctly estimated the power of the explosives. The mine was instantly a scene of wreck and confusion. The galleries were filled with dust; and great pieces of coal, weighing many pounds, were hurled in all directions, with almost the velocity of solid shot.

The chambers rocked and groaned, the crash of the explosion was deafening; and, in an agony of fear, Tinchman threw himself on his face, believing his hour had come.

When he ventured to look about he found the pathway to the shaft blocked. He was as completely cut off from it as if a wall had suddenly been let down.

A danger he had not thought of now faced him. He was not familiar with the galleries leading to the other shaft. Could he make his way there without guidance?

He felt sure the explosion had done the work he had counted on. Singer Sam was dead; but, if he could not escape from his imprisonment, what benefit could he ever derive from that fact?

In a frenzy of sudden terror he rushed backward along the gallery, hoping that if he kept to it he could not fail to reach his destination. But he had no light—he had not dared to bring one with him—and this added to his bewilderment and confusion. He was compelled to feel along the passage with his hands, dreading a pit-fall at every step; and to his dismay the passage seemed to open at every few feet into others.

He could not determine which of these to take, and his distress was almost pitiful.

After stumbling along for a great while, he blundered into one of these side galleries, mistaking it for the main passage. As a result, he soon found himself in a perfect labyrinth. The "drifts" for coal extended in every direction, divided only by the pillars left as supports, and by the heavy timbers used for the same purpose.

Tinchman knew he was lost, and his fright became so great in consequence that all his customary coolness forsook him. Clutching the cold walls, and crouching, fear-stricken, he sent up shout after shout for aid. The sounds seemed to be shut in by the confined space and to be thrown back at him.

He sprang up and wandered on and on, turning this way and that. Mocking eyes seemed to leer at him from the gloom, and whispers, as of voices, to pursue him. He believed he was going mad. He knew these were only phantasies—the creations of his own fears. Nevertheless, they were so real to him that he could not put them away; and he even saw and heard them when he closed his eyes and stopped his ears.

A cold perspiration broke out on his body, and he felt chilled, as if blown on by the arctic blasts.

On, on, he blindly stumbled, his terror increasing, his hope growing less. It seemed to him after a time that he had been wandering there for days. In the bitterness of his despair, he cursed the hour in which he entered the Calumet Mine with that murderous plan in his mind.

Whatever fate had fallen to the medicine-vender, a certain and horrible death he feared awaited him.

Suddenly a dancing light appeared before him, bringing a thrill that was half hope and half doubt. He stood tremulously watching it, not knowing but that it would disappear, and thus prove to be only one of the fancies that had been tormenting him. But it came straight on, a dancing speck that grew constantly larger, and he knew it was a miner's lamp.

With a cry of joy he rushed toward it, heedless of threatened falls and bruises.

The form of a man was now plainly revealed, coming toward him.

The sight brought a wild cry to his lips.

A few moments later he was face to face with the supposed miner.

It was Singer Sam!

With a shriek that was blood-curdling and almost maniacal, Tobe Tinchman turned, and ran in the opposite direction as fast as his trembling limbs would carry him. That he had encountered the medicine-vender's ghost, he had not a doubt.

Singer Sam was returning to the shaft by which he had descended, having completed his investigation. Brought thus face to face with Tinchman, he recognized the man as one of Dinsmore's satellites, but was at a loss to account for the fellow's strange actions.

All at once an inkling of the truth flashed upon him.

Tinchman ran on, not once daring to look back. In his wanderings he had come again into the main passage, though he did not know it.

The wild race brought him quickly to the foot of the shaft, which he beheld with a feeling of profound relief. Intensely superstitious, as many of the ignorant and criminal class are, he firmly believed that what he had seen in the darkness of the mine was nothing else than Singer Sam's disembodied spirit.

The cage was ready to ascend with its load of coal; and, springing by the man who was attending it, he leaped into the cage, where he crouched shiveringly, glaring back into the mine with a look that was almost insane.

"Send her up!" he yelled. "Send her up!"

The man knew not what to make of these strange actions. He did not know but that he might have a maniac to deal with; and obeyed with alacrity.

In a short time the medicine-vender appeared, and with solemn visage and wondering words listened to the miner's gruesome story.

CHAPTER XIV.

A VISIT TO MADAME MURIEL.

SINGER SAM was in great good-humor as he walked homeward through the night. He had begun to form a true theory of Tinchman's recent attempt.

"He must have had his toes pinched purty bad!" he soliloquized.

Then he began to sing, in a low, droning voice, making use of a parody of the song: "Listen to my tale of woe!"

"A little corn on a maiden grew;
Listen to my wail of toe.
Caused by the pinch of a too tight shoe,—
Instead of a three a number two!
It grew! It grew!
Listen to my wail of toe.

"As time went on as time will do,
Listen to my wail of toe.
The corn waxed red—the maiden blue—
Too true. Too true.
Listen to my wail of toe.

"She had a seat in the end of a pew:
Listen to my wail of toe
And a man with another seat in view,
Put his cowhide boots on her kangeroo!
Oh, uhew! Oh, uhew!
Listen to my wail of toe!"

He had thought of returning immediately to Henderson's with the information he had obtained, but when half-way to the house he changed his course and headed for Roscommon's.

He did not make his appearance at Henderson's until nearly noon on the following day. Then he came in, loaded with a store of good things in the way of eatables, dainties for the injured man and something more solid for himself and Cecil.

"I'm a-goin' to have a feast and then a talk!" screwing his face into a comical appearance. "I'd say talk first, but I always believe in bizness before pleasure. So we'll have somethin' good to eat, and that'll limber our tongues a bit. When we've devoured all this here, I've got a proposition to make."

Naturally these words, and especially the manner, piqued the curiosity of his friends. But they did not question him, already knowing from experience that it was best to let him take his own time, when he had a communication to make.

Cecil hustled about, getting the dinner in order, and arranging the things brought by the medicine-vender.

"It's a feast fit fer a king!" the latter declared, smiling as one dish after the other was placed on the table.

"Look at them bams sandwiches. Look at them cakes. Look at that pie. It's a punkin pie—though I wish 'twas a gooseberry! If 'twas a gooseberry, I've got a song that would fit it."

He drew up to the table, seized a knife, and flourished it ludicrously.

"They may boast, if they like, of their bacon and greens,
They may talk of roast turkey and game,
They may sing loud the praises of Boston baked beans.
These all may be just what they claim.
Roast beef and plum pudding may answer for some,
And oysters in stew or a fry;
I relish them all, but my greatest delight
Is a big piece of gooseberry pie.

"For there's nothing like gooseberry pie, says I,
Oh, don't I like gooseberry pie!
Since the time of the flood there's been nothing
so good,
So luscious, as gooseberry pie.

"And now I've grown older I love it still more,
And shall till the day that I die;
And the one who would seek for my friendship
must first
Fill me chuck-full of gooseberry pie.
As my teeth gently press through its lovely brown
crust,
And the moisture it holds is set free,
It sends through my frame such a thrill of delight;
Oh, it's luscious as luscious can be.

"For there's nothing like gooseberry pie, says I;
Oh, don't I like gooseberry pie!
Since the time of the flood there's been nothing
so good,
So luscious, as gooseberry pie."

The dinner that soon followed was as jovial in all its characteristics as was this preliminary of Singer Sam. Though Henderson was restricted from partaking as freely as his friends, he enjoyed it as much as they.

"Now, fer my plan!" pushing back from the table, and beaming at each in turn. "We've had the bizness, an' now we're ready fer the pleasure!"

One thing had been carefully taken into consideration by the medicine-vender. These friends of his were poor. There was probably a little in the way of wages still due Henderson; but, in a boomed town like Mineral Gap where six prices were demanded for everything, this little could not last long. And these friends were as sensitive as they were poor!

To offer them charity would be to offend and to wound their feelings. He had no wish to do that. Still, he desired to aid them.

"I hain't told you, yit, 'bout my trip into the mine!"

He drew out the bit of wire he had brought away with him, and exultantly exhibited it. After which, he went into a detail of all that had happened to him while there.

"Stead o' being the nigger, as Bass thought, 'twas Tobe Tinchman. I'm as well satisfied of that as of anything. And from the yell he give when he seen me, I think 'twas me he tried to kill!"

"But that ain't the pint I want to git at, now!" when this matter had been duly commented on. "Our chief pard, hyer, won't be able to do any work fer a goodish spell. Mebbe he can knock about an' look after the things around the house in a day or two, but he can't go to work in the mines;—an' I don't want him to go to work there fer awhile, neither. I'm thinkin' that I will have somethin' better an' more interestin' fer him to do before long!"

"But until then! I've been to see Roscommon. He's got a place that he can give Cece, here. A place that'll just fit the boy. Suit him to a T. Roscommon was a-askin' me if I didn't know of some one to do writin' fer him, an' I recommended Cece.

"Don't go to blushin' an' haugin' back, now, like a bashful school-girl! I know you can tend to the job jist as good as the next; an' there'll be some money in it. Not anything big, but enough to git along on, tell Tom is ready fer the work I'm goin' to cut out fer him!"

Cecil did indeed seem flustered and confused by this sudden proposition. But after considering the matter for a few moments, he announced his willingness to accept the place offered him.

"I'm sure I can do as well as I can, and that is well as any one can do!" he declared, with a sudden show of determination. "Yes, I'll take the place; and if I don't give satisfaction, it will not be because I don't try hard enough."

Singer Sam expressed himself as having no doubts on this score.

He knew the boy would give satisfaction. He had fibbed a little in making the proposition to Cecil, for he had been the solicitor instead of Roscommon. He had explained to Roscommon the position of Henderson and Marsden, and asked him to give the latter something to do. That there was little to do, made no difference. If Roscommon really had no work at which the boy could be profitably employed, he had asked that he be given work anyway; agreeing to foot the bill.

This offer of a place for Cecil was not wholly pleasing to Henderson, though he saw the advisability of the boy's doing something to add to their limited means.

Singer Sam was taken with the idea, and succeeded in conveying a large degree of his own enthusiasm to these friends.

When the dinner dishes had been duly washed and put away, the house set in order, Henderson made comfortable, and such things as he might need placed within easy reach, Cecil set out with Singer Sam for Roscommon's office.

Immediately on arriving there, and being inducted into his new position, he found that writing and copying were not all the things he would be expected to do. There would be errands to run, a thing not mentioned by his friend.

He was not inclined to shrink from this work; but when he found that his first errand would take him to the residence of Madame Muriel, he drew back almost in affright.

His lips and cheeks whitened. For some reason he held the madame in mortal terror. The fact that he had been once run down by her carriage, seemed scarcely sufficient to account for this.

Roscommon and Singer Sam were so busily engaged in conversation that they did not notice this peculiar manifestation on the boy's part; and as he offered no verbal protest, he departed with the written message which had been delivered to him.

After he had started, he hesitated for a moment at the top of the stairs; then returned to the office; and, beckoning to Singer Sam, whispered into his ear:

"I saw a negro crouching in the corridor back there awhile ago, when we came in, and I believe it was the one that stays at Madame Muriel's."

The medicine-vender started, and then observed how pale and agitated Cecil was.

He spoke hurriedly to Roscommon, and then went out into the corridor where the negro had been seen by the boy. As he turned from Roscommon's door, he observed that a note was tacked to it with a pin.

He could find nothing of the negro, and when he came back he called the lawyer's attention to the note.

Roscommon took it down and read it. It was from the madame; and there could be no doubt that the black whom the boy had seen had placed it there. This was his way of delivering a message.

"Afraid of his own shadow!" was Singer Sam's growling comment.

"Why couldn't he have walked in like anybody else and give it to ye?"

"The madame wants to see me!" Roscommon asserted looking up from the paper. "That's the second time she has sent for me. The first request came by mail. She is getting scared!"

The missive he had handed to Cecil related to this first request. It was a reply to it, stating that because of other engagements he could not come. The note brought by the negro and so slyly pinned to the door seemed to prove that the madame was indeed anxious to meet him.

"She knows very well that I have undertaken to aid you," said Roscommon, smiling serenely at Singer Sam. "She's fearful; and she wants to do something to block our game. But I sha'n't go just yet. We'll keep her on tenter-hooks for a while. It will do her high-mightiness a deal of good!"

As the black had evidently disappeared from the place, Cecil was again sent out with the message.

He was familiar with the route to Madame Muriel's and reached the house without delay. His pull at the door-bell brought the Loy; and he was ushered speedily into the madame's presence.

In spite of his efforts to retain his composure, he shuddered as he was shown into the room occupied by the madame. There was something uncanny and nerve-thrilling in all its arrangements, from the heavy curtains and half-revealed Cupids and Satyrs to the fountain playing in the dim, uncertain light.

Without unnecessary delay he delivered to her the note, and waited for her reply.

"You don't want your fortune told?" was the unexpected query, which the woman fired at him as soon as she had read the note.

Cecil protested that he did not.

"I should like to tell your master his!" and her eyes snapped. "I know he'd like to hear it! I'm very sorry he couldn't come to-day, for he could have heard something to his advantage, and something that would be sure to please. But he's afraid to have his fortune told; just as you are!"

She put away the letter and began to question the boy about the man who had so recently taken him into his employment. The inquiries were deftly framed, but Cecil knew so little that if he had told all it would not greatly have advantaged the madame. He told, however, just as little as he could.

He was about to turn away, for the purpose of making his exit, when his quick ear caught the sound of a light footfall. Wheeling as if on a pivot, he saw Laura Dutton glide from the room. He started. Had she been in the room all the time? If so, where had she been concealed?

These questions were not, however, what most haunted him as he made his way down the stairway and into the street. That was the whiteness and ghastliness of the face he had for a moment seen revealed.

CHAPTER XV.

BASS'S BLUSTER.

CECIL MARSDEN had scarcely left the room, when Madame Muriel vanished from it also in pursuit of Laura Dutton.

There had been a stormy interview in progress between the madame and Laura, which had been interrupted by the ringing of the bell and the admission of Cecil. The madame had pushed Laura into a little alcove, drawn the curtains about her, and commanded her to remain there quietly until the visitor's departure.

Laura had seen Cecil turn to leave, and thought him gone, when she emerged from this place of concealment.

The irate madame found the girl weeping, when overtaken by her in another room. There came a flash of defiance into the girl's eyes, though, as she saw herself thus followed.

"Why did you leave there before the boy went away?" was the madame's indignant question. "You did it purposely! You wanted him to know we had been having words."

Laura very promptly denied this charge, explaining why she had gone from the place.

The madame glowered at her in great ill-temper.

"I don't know that I care about that! What I want to know is, what did you do with those jewels?"

"I have already told you that I don't know anything about them. I never saw them. I never had them!"

"How dare you lie to me that way, Laura Dutton? How dare you?" shaking her finger reprovingly at her. "I know you took them, and there's no use for you to deny it!"

The girl looked fixedly at her accuser, a certain fine scorn resting on her handsome face.

"Do your worst, Madame Muriel! I see you are determined to degrade and humiliate me. You won't believe anything I say. Again and again I have told you that I know nothing of your jewels!"

The words, and the girl's manner of uttering them, threw the woman into a more fearful rage than ever.

"Of course you will lie, Laura Dutton. I expected that. A girl that will steal will lie. You took them, and you disposed of them at Baumgard's pawn-shop. I have the proof of it here in the house!"

The girl caught her breath, terrified at the madame's vixenish appearance. The woman seemed a fury, as she made this charge. Laura's life there had been made almost unendurable of late. The madame had never been kind to her. At times she had treated her with gross brutality; and such outbursts as the present were becoming alarmingly frequent.

She feared that some great peril lay behind the madame's words.

"Whatever proof you may have, I shall not acknowledge it!" she asserted. "I know that I am innocent; and nothing can make me say I am not!"

The madame stepped from the room, and called loudly:

"Baumgard! Come here! This girl is disposed to lie out of the thing!"

A weazened, dried-up, little man made his appearance in response to this summons. It was Baumgard, the Jew pawnbroker. There was a look of low and devilish cunning on his swarthy face, his hooked nose resembled the beak of an eagle, and his dark eyes had a crafty, conscienceless expression. He was such a man as might become the fit and pliant tool of such a woman.

He glanced at Laura with hypocritical commiseration, as he entered.

"She says she never sold those things to you!" the madame averred. "She says she never saw them!"

She held up her hands in a sort of pious horror, as if such duplicity passed her comprehension.

"My tear!" and the little Jew shrugged his shoulders, meaningly. "It is 't'vay with such people. You cannot expect dot dhey vill connect when dhey bafe been sdealing!"

"But she brought the jewels to you, did she not? Here, let me see them!"

The Jew took a package from an inner pocket, slowly and carefully unrolled it, and exhibited some jeweled ornaments.

"Dhose are dhese fery t'ings vbat she prought me!" he unblushingly declared. "Dhot is 't'v troot, so hellup me, if I efer shoke it!"

He strove to wipe away an imaginary tear, to express his pity that one so young and so beautiful should be guilty of such actions.

"I kvestioned her, vhere did she get dhem, and she say dot dhey vbas her mudder's, vbat had died. Dot vbas 't'v troot!"

He drew the jewelry closer to him, as if fearful the articles might disappear from under his very eyes, and solemnly folded his hands to attest the accuracy of his assertions.

"It is not so!" Laura boldly and almost fiercely declared. "I tell you, I never saw those things before. Not until this minute! Any one might know that the scamp is lying!"

The Jew threw his hands heavenward in amazement, while his features took on a look of intense surprise.

"So hellup me cracious, I vas not delling no lies! Dot gyurl she pring me dhose t'ings only gyesterday morning. Dat vbas de solemn troot."

The nervous strain under which Laura was suffering would have touched any but the most calloused heart. Her manifest distress had, however, no effect on these two. The madame seemed to gloat over it; and the Jew only stood by, characteristically shrugging his shoulders and muttering unintelligibly to himself.

The charges and denials were brought to an abrupt close by the ingress of Jim Bass. He had

entered the kitchen; and not finding Laura there had boldly gone in search of her, feeling that he had a roving commission to wander as he pleased about the place.

"What's the meaning of this hyer?" Bass demanded, in his most pompous tones, glowering savagely first at Madame Muriel and then at the Jew.

Laura was pleased with his coming. She felt that Bass, in spite of his well known bluster, was a friend she could depend on.

"They have been accusing me of stealing those things!" and she pointed scornfully to the jewelry.

The Jew grasped the articles, pressed the paper about them, and thrust them into his pocket.

"I wouldn't take 'em if you'd give 'em to me!" Bass sneered, noting the action.

"She *did* steal them!" was the madame's wrathful assertion, paying no heed to the Jew's movements or to Bass's words. "They are mine, and she stole them from me, and sold them to this pawnbroker!"

"I sha'n't believe a word of it!" and Bass grew red and white by turns, showing his exceeding uncomfortableness. "Ner I sha'n't stand by and see that gal abused. I'm her guardeen, I am; an' don't you fergit it! Duly appinted by myself. I expect to marry her one of these hyer days, an' I don't 'low to let nobody go to treatin' her wrong!"

He drew himself up with a martial air, and with a seeming unconscious motion let his right hand slide toward his bulging hip-pocket.

"You let that gal alone, Madame Muriel! An' as fer you," facing the Jew sternly, "if you don't git out of hyer with yer lies, I'll h'ist ye out with the toe o' my boot!"

The madame's fury passed all bonds.

"If you don't get out, I'll send for Jingo and have him throw you out!"

Jingo was the name by which the negro was known.

"Jingo be dad-gasted! If he comes foolin' around me, I'll jist nacherly blow the top o' his head off!"

"I'll send for Dinsmore!" the madame screamed, almost beside herself.

"Thankee! I wisht ye would. He's a gentleman I'm a-wantin' to see. Likely if he comes he'll pay me the balance of that five thousan' he owes me!"

Such a startled look as came into the madame's eyes!

Bass saw that the shot had struck home; that she had information of Dinsmore's iniquitous offer; and he resolved to take advantage of it.

"Send fer him!" fairly shouting the words.

"If you only will, Madame Muriel, I'll divvy the money with ye, when he pays me!"

"Jingo!" she called. "Come here!"

She knew that the call would receive no reply, else she would not have made it. She hoped, however, that it would influence Bass to modify his tone.

It had the contrary effect.

"If that nigger comes near me, Madame Muriel, do you know what I'll do? I'll pile up a lot of blazin'-powder under him, stick a fuse into it, an' tech a lighted match to the fuse!"

Again the madame winced and paled.

"That's what I'll do!" Bass vociferated. "It'd please me to give him a blowin' up like that. Puff!" throwing up his hands. "Blow him sky-high! I'm a-thinkin' if I did so, it'd rain chunks of black meat fer a whole week!"

The madame crouched in her chair as if panic-stricken.

Throughout it all Laura Dutton had remained almost in one position, not understanding the drift of Bass's declamatory words, but grateful for the fact that he had interfered in her behalf.

As for the Jew, Baumgard—there was a look of terror in his conscienceless eyes, and he clasped and unclasped his dark, skinny hands in an uneasy, fidgety way.

"I don't think you'll send fer the nigger, ner fer Dinsmore, either!" Bass averred.

The madame seemed absolutely crushed. These indiscreet statements of the cowboy might ruin everything. If he would make them here, in the presence of Laura and the Jew, would he not make them elsewhere? She mentally anathematized the day in which Dinsmore had been so foolish as to take so heedless and reckless a fellow into his confidence.

"You won't send fer either of 'em!" Bass repeated. "'Cause why, I don't think it'd be healthy fer you to do so. An' I'm a-thinkin', too, that you'll let up on this abuse of the gal. If you don't, you an' the major will be shore to hear somethin' drop. I reckon you ketch on?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," the madame wailed.

"I think you understand well enough," said Bass, swelling with the importance of his victory. "If you don't, I reckon I can make it plainer. The question is, shal I?"

The madame deprecatingly put up her hands.

"I thought you wouldn't want that. Now, I'm a-goin' to go! I'm a-comin' back, though, in an hour or less. If that Shylock there says another word about that jewelry, it'll be the worse for him, too! An' if you charge that gal ag'in with stealin' that trumpety, it'll be the worse fer

you! Now, hearken to what I say: I'm a-goin' an' if I find when I come back that you've been mistreatin' her ag'in, I'll have somethin' more to say, an' I'll say it in a way to make somebody *seringe!*"

With this last thrust, he stalked importantly from the room, giving the butt of his revolver a final hitch as he disappeared.

His threats were not without effect on the madame and Baumgard. The Jew left almost immediately; and the madame, with all the fire taken out of her voice and manner, ordered the girl to the kitchen.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SECRET CONCLAVE.

BASS's bluster bore fruit that night in a meeting held in the privacy of Madame Muriel's room.

There were present in addition to the madame, Major Dinsmore, Baumgard the Jew, and Tobe Tinchman.

There was an air of seriousness and a lack of cheerfulness plainly observable. Sam Bass's defection weighed heavily on the entire company. Dinsmore had reached the belief that the cowboy would make no attempt on the life of Singer Sam. But he had thought this was because of Bass's fear, and not because of his treachery to their interests. Now it seemed that Bass had openly turned against them.

This was a thing full of menace. It was not the only thing, however, that troubled them. Twice had Dinsmore's plans been brought to naught. It may even be said they had been brought to naught three times. The negro had failed, Tinchman had worse than failed, and the cowboy had made a change of front. Evidently, something must be done. Singer Sam was increasing his power and influence every day.

The Jew's presence in this select company of villains proved him to be one of them.

"I think Bass is angling for more money," the major averred, twisting uneasily in his chair. "I see now that I made a great mistake in approaching him as I did. He is wholly unreliable, a coward and a braggart; and I don't doubt would expose what I said to him if he was well paid for it."

"It ish always money, money!" wailed the Jew, lifting his hands. "That ish t'e trouble with dis peesness!"

"You can't expect to get along without using money," the major intemperately snarled. "It takes money to make money, and to protect us!"

"You may bet that that is so!" Tinchman coincided, with a solemn nod of his head. "It takes money to git along in our bizness. We've got to pay policemen to keep their eyes shet, judges to befriend us an' lawyers to defend us. You bet it takes a mint o' money! But we git money out o' it—so what's the odds?"

"The odds will be pretty big, if we don't find some way to shut off the wind of this medicine man!" and Dinsmore frowned, savagely. "He's making headway against us every day. I understand he visited Baumgard's shop this morning. He came in there to buy some second-hand articles, so he claimed; but we know that it was for a far different purpose."

The Jew muttered an assent.

"I reckon he didn't see any of that last swag?" was Tinchman's nervous question. "Cause if he did, I'm afeerd we're in for it."

"You may trust me for dot, mine frient. He saw nothings!"

Tinchman breathed a sigh of relief.

"Them watches that I took from Livingstone's house would be too blamed easy to identify!"

"I think Baumgard is a safe enough man!" the madame purred. "We'd be better off if we had a few more such men."

The Jew smiled and rubbed his hands greedily together in acknowledgment of the truth of this observation.

From the drift of the conversation it would seem that this quartette was banded together for purposes of robbery. And this was the case. The madame and the major were at the head of the burglarious organization, Tinchman was one of the men actually engaged in the work, and the Jew pawnbroker acted as a receiver of the stolen goods. He had connection with other men of like instincts in distant cities, and the goods were shipped to these to be disposed of. Tinchman was not the only active member of the band, however. There were many of them, of kinslip in villainy, varying only in their adaptability and expertness. Some were mere pickpockets and shoplifters; others were of the more courageous sort to which Tinchman belonged.

"He will break up our band if something is not done to shut him off," said the major, directing the talk again to Singer Sam. "That is what he is here for. I am free to confess that I am afraid of him, for there are few such dangerous detectives in the country."

The Jew's eyes rolled wildly, and he could not repress an exhibition of fear.

Tinchman laughed coarsely as he looked at the cowering pawnbroker.

He did not express his thoughts, though; and

for a few moments the little company remained silent.

"I have been trying in vain to find some way by which I might entrap this man," said the madame. "I have been studying, too, how we may be able to reach Roscommon. Is there nothing you can advise, major?"

"You might lure him into the den here for the purpose of getting his fortune told, and insert a knife under his fifth rib!"

Dinsmore tried to be mirthful, but the words sounded hollowly enough.

"Did you make anything out of that house I cracked over on Tenth street?" Tinchman inquired of the madame. "I reckoned some of them would come to you, and you'd be able to rake in another batch of shekels!"

The madame was able to "rake in" considerable sums in this way, on occasion. Tinchman referred to the habit some people had of running to her for instruction whenever any ill overtook them. Some had even come to her concerning the robberies of their houses, when Tinchman had been the man who had done the work. And at such times the madame had exacted a goodly fee, and sent them away without any information whatever.

Major Dinsmore was shrewd in many things, and in none more so than in his management of the cracksman.

He arose, and going into another room, brought from a sideboard a bottle of liquor and some glasses. The liquor was fiery stuff; and Tinchman smacked his lips in anticipation, as the major proceeded to pour out a quantity into the glasses which he arranged on a little table.

He touched one of these to his lips and pushed another to Tinchman.

"Sample it!" he commanded. "It's the genuine truck, and will do all of us good. We're a scare-crow lot up here to-night, and we need a little fire in our veins!"

He pushed other glasses to the madame and to the Jew. All made a pretense of drinking, except Tinchman. There was no pretense about it on his part. He drained the fiery stuff to the dregs, smacked his chops like a thirsty dog, and held up the glass for more.

"It's as free as water," said Dinsmore, reassuringly, "though it costs a deal more. Take all you want of it. It will brace you up. Put some backbone into all of us!"

He set down the bottle and again sipped at the stuff in his glass.

"As I was saying: If we don't do something to rid ourselves of this bloodhound of a detective every one of us will see the inside of a prison in less than two months. I've had spies watching him, and he's working like a Turk. I've no doubt he's already gathered enough evidence to convict us in any court—unless," he added slyly, "we could succeed in buying the court. And, as Baumgard says, that takes too much money."

Dinsmore had a well-defined object in thus tempting the cracksman. Since his failure in the mine, together with all its attendant and terrifying consequences, Tinchman had been sorely averse to making any further efforts against Singer Sam. The fearful memories of those hours spent by him in the darkness of the underground gallery haunted him even in his dreams. He was aware, now, of course, that he had been mistaken in his supposition that he had there encountered the detective's ghost. But he could not rid himself of the feeling of horror that had then swept over him. He had even declared to the major that, as far as he was concerned, he would have nothing more to do with anything so perilous.

It was for this reason the major had been making his statements about the danger they were in from the detective's continued presence in town. He desired to work Tinchman up to a point of desperation.

And now, as he continued to ply his confederate with the potent liquor, he began to reiterate the strong words he had already used. The madame joined him in this, and together they almost caused the hair to rise up on the head of the trembling Jew.

Tinchman drank so freely and frequently that in a very short time the influence of the liquor began to be observed in his thickened utterance.

At this stage of the game, the major tapped him on the shoulder and requested a few minutes' private interview.

The cracksman got on his legs unsteadily and followed Dinsmore into another room.

"There's no use of talking," the latter observed, motioning Tinchman to a chair.

"Guess I had better set down, er I'll fall down!" and the cracksman showed his teeth in an idiotic grin.

"There's no use of talking," not heeding this interruption. "We have got to down this detective, or he will down us; and, Tinchman, you're the only man who can do it!"

"Whazze matter with you?" Tinchman biccoughed.

"I rely on you to do the work!" somewhat imperiously. "You need not fear the consequences. I shall look well to that. Put him out of the way, Tinchman. I don't care how you do it. And if you get into any trouble because of it, I will stand by you. I'll pour out money

like water, if it becomes necessary. They can't get a jury in this town but what I can buy some member of it. A hung jury, Tinchman, is as good as an acquittal. An' I'm not afraid but what I can fix any jury so that it will be sure to hang."

Tinchman's courage had returned with the mounting of the liquor to his brain.

"If you'll stand b-by me, major! (bic)" weaving uncertainly in his chair, "banged if I don't do it! There hain't nothin' small about me but my feet!" grinning again in that horrible way. "Major, here's my hand. I'll do it!"

This was but the beginning of the conversation, which lasted for nearly a half-hour. Dinsmore gave him some money, with a promise of more. He feared to furnish him any more liquor; though he determined to keep the cracksman in a state of semi-intoxication until the deed was done.

CHAPTER XVII.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

SINGER SAM, "got up regardless of expense," as he had expressed it, stood at the street entrance to Madame Muriel's den. His worn, silk tile had been given a new rubbing, his shoes shone glossily, and his clothing had manifestly received some attention at his hands. There had been no change in it, but its renovated appearance betokened a desire to look well in the eyes of the madame.

It was the morning of the third day following the conclave. The detective had had a growing wish to call on the madame and speak with her face to face. Certain secret reasons urged him to this. Well aware that the madame was of a treacherous disposition, he had taken the precaution of informing Henderson and Marsden where he was going.

He hesitated for a time as he stood at the door, as if doubting the wisdom of his venture. He looked up and down the street to see if he was observed. Then he gave the bell a pull, and awaited the coming of the boy.

When ushered into the madame's presence, he found her arrayed in silks and smiles. She had not anticipated his visit; but she was equal to the emergency, and greeted him with the kindest and most honeyed of words.

The detective seemed ill at ease amid such sumptuous surroundings. He had removed his hat, which he now delivered awkwardly to the madame. Then he looked at the chairs as if not sure that each of them might not be some devilish contrivance or trap. Finally he chose one, doubled up his limbs, and sat down very gingerly.

The madame's musical laugh told that she appreciated the comicalities of his looks and actions.

"My dear Mr. Johnson!"—the boy had borne up a card with the name of Sam Johnson on it—"do you know I have thought of you ever so much since the time of our first meeting? Your rescue of that child was a brave act, a noble act! I thanked you then for it, and I now thank you again!"

"And then your singing that night at the Opera-House! I am sure I never heard anything quite like it!"

Singer Sam was nervously running the fingers of one hand up and down an arm of the chair. To all seeming, the witchery of the madame's presence quite overpowered him.

"Thankee, ma'am, fer the compliment!" fidgeting again and pulling at his scanty beard. "I have had other fellers—I mean others—say that it was rather out o' the common. I can sing some, when I git started!"

He smiled as if pleased with the ease with which his words came.

"Yes, I 'low it was purty good. If I'd only have been given more time, I could have done better!"

"I don't see how you could have done better!" was the madame's sweet protest. "It was a wonderful performance! And do you know, Mr. Johnson, that the words and music have haunted me from that day to this! I can hear them ringing in my ears now!"

There was more of truth in this than the madame would have cared to have generally known. The words of that song had a meaning for her which had served to indelibly fix them in her memory.

"It's too bad you didn't bring your guitar along!" she declared. "I should surely ask you to sing those verses again. I am called a pretty fair singer, myself; but I don't think any one could throw such expression into them as you did."

The medicine-vender's face beamed with delight. To be thus flattered seemed a pleasure, indeed.

"I can go an' git it!" his face showing his eagerness to gratify her wishes. "Twouldn't take me very long, ma'am!"

She put a hand to her lips to conceal the sneer which she could not prevent.

"My dear Mr. Johnson, I really couldn't ask you to do such a thing—to so put yourself out for the sole purpose of pleasing me!"

"'Twouldn't be no trouble at all, ma'am!" he protested, making as if to rise.

She waved him back imperiously, and declared he should do nothing of the kind.

"I presume you came to have your fortune told?" eying him closely, with that false smile on her face. "I think I could tell you a very good fortune, Mr. Johnson. Fortune-telling is my business, you know."

"I don't think I should want to know it," he said, drawing back. "If the rest o' my life hain't to be no better'n the past, I don't keer anything about hearin' of it."

"But it may be a great deal better. I think it will be!"

"Don't keer anythin' about hearin' of it!" with a sudden show of determination. "I didn't come up here fer that."

"Ah!" uplifting her eyebrows.

"No; I jist come to talk over that singin' bizness!"

"And to enjoy yourself for a time? Such an object flatters me!"

She arose, and begging to be excused for a moment, produced from a drawer not far away, some wine and wine-glasses. These she placed on a little tray, which she set on a table.

"You will at least join me in a glass of wine?" drawing the table up between them.

She filled the glasses and offered one to the detective.

He had been watching her closely. He knew that in thus calling on her, he was really playing with fire. Madame Muriel was a dangerous woman. When she got up to procure the wine, he immediately suspected some deadly trick; and he had seen her, as she brought out the glasses, drop a little white powder into one of them. This fact she had concealed by filling the glasses almost as soon as she put them down; but he was, nevertheless, sure that the glass now tendered to him was the one in which the powder had been dropped.

"This is r'ale kind of you," he said, watching her covertly, but not taking up the glass. "It's been a good while sence I've looked on the wine when it is red. I've heard it said that the stuff is liable to bite like a serpent and sting like an adder!"

The two small glasses were sitting not far apart; and as he said this he began to push them idly about with his fingers; and succeeded in exchanging his glass for that of the madame.

A deathly pallor came to her cheeks as she saw this. She knew the action was intentional on the part of Singer Sam; and therefore that her treacherous duplicity had become known to him.

"Wine is purty good truck, though," he smilingly observed, taking up the glass he had thus secured and squinting at its contents. "Purty good truck, if it hain't been doctored. They doctors their liquors so much nowadays that I'm most afeared to drink any of it. About five-fifths of the stuff will eat a hole in an iron kittle in less'n fifteen minutes. But I guess this here is all right."

She was trembling visibly, and the pallor of her face was increasing.

"Here's to your good health," affecting not to notice this and making ready to clink his glass against hers.

The madame did not respond, but sat as white and rigid as any statue. She dared not swallow the deadly draught which she had prepared for him; and how to avoid doing so she knew not, without at the same time confessing the nature of her trick.

Singer Sam gave her a puzzled look.

"Hain't you goin' to drink?" he asked, with every indication of innocent astonishment. "Well, now, that beats me! Here you've gone and got out your wine, and now you won't jine me in drinkin' to our mutual good health!"

He set down his glass and stared at her in amazement.

"I—have a sudden fit of headache!" she stammered, pressing a hand to her forehead. "I am affected this way sometimes. You must not think anything strange of it. When these spells come on me I dare not drink or eat anything."

She pushed heavily back from the table.

"Liable to give you the cramps, eh?" still staring at her in that fixed way. "Well, that's bad! If I had jist thought to bring along a bottle of my Magic Cure!"

"It will pass away in a few moments!" she assured.

"Well, dog my cats! That's too bad! An' jist as we was about to drink each other's health. Mebbe if you'd swaller this it'd help ye!"

He took up her glass and held it out toward her.

"No!" she exclaimed, almost fiercely. "I don't want it. If you don't care to drink yours, I will send for a servant to take the wine away."

She arose to her feet, staggered to the wall, and pulled the handle of the bell which had heretofore been invisible.

Singer Sam was on guard against some new act of treachery. He was debating whether or not it would be best to throw aside his assumptions of ignorance and boldly charge her with

her attempted crime. At the same time he was narrowly noting the doors, intending it to be taken by surprise.

Unfortunately he was not familiar with the secrets of Madame Muriel's den. Just when he began to think it time for the servant to come in view, one of the curtains behind him was slyly drawn aside and the negro Jingo leaped out on him.

The ringing of the bell had been for the purpose of summoning Jingo, and not to call a servant, as the madame had asserted.

The room was very dimly lighted, and perhaps this had aided Jingo in making his stealthy approach. It was also heavily carpeted, and this had deadened the sounds of his footsteps.

Never was a man more bewildered and astounded than was the detective when he felt the clasp of the negro's strong arms. All the advantage was on the side of the black.

Nevertheless, he determined not to submit without a desperate struggle. He tried to wheel around that he might the more successfully cope with his adversary. But the negro had a grip of iron.

He was not so tall as Singer Sam, but he was heavier in build and equally as strong. Evenly matched, it would be hard to say which might have come off victor. As it was, there seemed little hope for the attacked man.

Singer Sam, struggling with the energy of desperation, almost succeeded in breaking away; when a heavy blow on the head from the negro's fist brought him to the floor senseless.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHITHER?

As the detective fell to the floor, Madame Muriel ran forward with a little cry of triumph.

"You have not killed him?" she asked, the intonation showing that she wished he had.

She could see, however, that Singer Sam was only temporarily stunned. Already he began to show signs of reviving.

The negro stood over him; and, as he began to move, drew out a knife.

"I wish we dared to stab him here, and have done with him!" the madame grated, with unfeminine fierceness and vindictiveness.

She glanced about the room.

"It would not be safe!" whispering the words as if to herself. "No, it would not be safe. We must dispose of him in some other way."

A moan came from the detective's lips, drawing her to his side; and again she glared into his face with the look of a fiend.

Singer Sam recovered consciousness more quickly than they thought. The blow had knocked him down and somewhat stunned him, but its effects had not been lasting. But he did not immediately regain the full control of his faculties. There was a haziness of thought and a general uncertainty and hesitancy, that made it impossible for him to take advantage of any opportunity which chance might throw in his way.

He heard the madame's last words, but he had no power to spring erect and fight for his liberty and his life.

"He is coming to," was her apprehensive declaration. "Something must be done!"

She looked appealingly at Jingo, who, with his black clothing and black face, seemed more like a spot of gloom in the dim light of the apartment than anything else.

He put back his knife and lifted Singer Sam in his arms;—trailing the detective's heels on the carpet as he essayed to move him.

"This way!" he whispered; and pushing aside the curtains by which he had entered, disappeared with his heavy burden.

The madame sprung to the drawer from which she had taken the wine, secured some articles, and followed.

The detective knew that he had been lifted and that he now was being borne from the room. He made a desperate effort to struggle from the negro's hands, but it resulted in nothing. In his present state he was powerless.

"Keep still there!" and the black glared at him as if he could freely murder him then and there.

There were but few steps to be taken—only from the room recently occupied, across a narrow hall hidden by curtains, and into a smaller room.

On the floor of this, the negro let the detective fall heavily; stretching himself with a sigh of relief as the dead weight slipped from his fingers.

Even as he did so, Madame Muriel was at his side.

"Here, take this!" was her nervous exclamation. "Or, let me do it!"

She pushed by the negro, knelt at the side of Singer Sam, saturated a piece of cotton from a bottle and applied it to his nostrils. The odor at once filled the room. It was the odor of chloroform!

Even with his senses half-locked as they were, Singer Sam recognized this odor, and tried to fight against the effects of the deadly drug.

The negro stooped down and held him, while the madame continued to press the cotton to his nose. Neither spoke; being consumed by

their intense excitement, and having no time for words.

The detective could feel his senses stealing from him. A drowsy lethargy oppressed him in spite of his efforts to resist it. All the power of thought seemed dissipating. He felt as if borne through space on beds of down, or hammock-swung in an infinite void.

Presently he seemed to be sinking, sinking, sinking! Down, down, down to unmeasured depths! This was followed by a shock, and then the darkness of total oblivion.

He awoke—it was a strange and unnatural kind of an awakening—in darkness. He was chilled to the bone, the icy congealment seeming to have settled suffocatingly about his heart. He moved; and found that the chill was produced by the pool of cold water in which he was lying.

After much effort he drew himself to his feet and felt about. Damp and clammy walls rewarded his touch. A piece of rotting wood which he chanced to clutch crumbled wetly between his fingers. Wonderingly he looked upward, moving slowly around in the water and in the ooze which so plentifully abounded.

It did not take him long to ascertain that he was plastered from head to foot with this ooze. His feet sunk in it. It was of a mucky consistency.

But where was he? A low cry escaped him, as, looking upward as if through a narrow slit, he beheld a pale and trembling star.

A gleam of the terrible truth came to him as memory began to reassert itself. He recalled his visit to Madame Muriel, the effort to poison him by means of the wine, the battle with the negro! What followed that was extremely dream-like and uncertain.

Yet here he was! He recognized the character of the surroundings. He was at the bottom of an abandoned mining-shaft, of which there were a number in and about Mineral Gap. No ore had rewarded the projectors of the mine, and no side excavations had been made. For all practical purposes, and to all seeming, he might have been in the bottom of an old well.

He looked up at the rim of the shaft, only faintly discernible, and shuddered. And he had been tossed from there! He could not doubt it. Only the water and the soft ooze had saved his life.

Inadvertently, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, he put a hand up to his face. He started. The thin beard was gone. He felt of his head. The wig that helped to make up his disguise had also disappeared. The beard had been false, like the hair.

These discoveries led to a further examination, and he soon learned that the coat he had worn to Madame Muriel's, and the tall hat were also missing. The coat had been replaced by another. As for the hat, it might be near him. But when he felt around for it he could not find it.

It required no very keen discernment to understand the meaning of all this. He knew, when the madame placed the drugged wine before him, that she had recognized him as Benton, the detective. That she had resolved on his death; and that when, believing if he was not already dead the fall would kill him, he had been cast into the abandoned shaft, the previous precaution had been taken of making these changes in his bodily appearance.

Though the shaft was deserted, there was a chance that the detective's body might be found there. If so found it would not be recognized as the body of the medicine-vender, who might have been seen entering Madame Muriel's establishment.

The woman was cool-headed and calculating. She had reasoned that in all probability some of the detective's friends or aids knew of his visit. If so, a search would be instituted. In that event she could brazenly make the statement that he had gone away as he had come. This could not be disproved; and she believed it would be hard, if the body was found, to establish the fact that it was the body of the man who had visited her.

She had played her cards well; and Singer Sam, looking despairingly up at that one pale star, fully realized it.

CHAPTER XIX.

DISCOVERED.

TOM HENDERSON twisted uneasily in the big chair which he had drawn up to the window. He was recovering rapidly from his recent hurts, and could now get about without assistance. He was succeeding very well in his task of light housekeeping, though the monotony of the long days sorely told on him. He was used to an active life, and chafed at this temporary confinement.

He had placed his chair so that he could look out down the street leading to the heart of the town. He was uneasy because of the long delay in the return of Singer Sam.

As stated, the detective had told Henderson and Marsden where he was going; and he had also said that if he did not return within a given time, they might know that something had oc-

curred to prevent. The time fixed had passed, and he was still away.

When he could no longer endure the suspense, Henderson got up, took his hat from a peg, and sallied forth into the street. He had no very well defined ideas of what he ought to do. He hesitated to approach the authorities, and would do so only as a last resort.

Singer Sam had gone to Madame Muriel's, and Henderson now bent his steps in the same direction. He resolved to investigate the matter privately before trying anything else. After all, the detective might have prolonged his visit considerably beyond the allotted time without being himself aware of it. Madame Muriel was a woman of rare conversational powers, and could give to dull Time the wings of the wind, if she so chose.

Henderson's first thought, almost, was of Laura Dutton. He had been acquainted with Laura for many months. It was only a casual acquaintance, which had never been pursued, but it had left its impression on him.

To Laura then he went: avoiding the front entrance and cautiously approaching the kitchen.

He found Miss Dutton in that asylum—for it had become, to a large extent, an asylum for her from the ill-treatment of the madame and the major. They did not often follow her there with their bitter words; hence she fled to it more and more, as a shelter.

Since the time Jim Bass had so blusteringly threatened Madame Muriel, the girl had enjoyed a fair degree of peace and quiet. No violence had been offered her, though she was snubbed and made to feel her inferiority and menial position.

"Glad to see you!" said Henderson, his face reddening with pleasure.

The kindness of the girl's greeting, and her gentle tact, soon put him at ease. He ceased to feel the awkwardness of his huge bulk, and found that his hands were more easy to dispose of than he had ever dreamed could be the case. Heretofore, in the presence of ladies, these members had been utterly useless and unmanageable—always in the way. Now, as he began to talk to Laura, he forgot that he had any hands.

With stammering impetuosity, he plunged into the subject that had brought him there. Laura's interest was genuine. She had heard the medicine-vender on the street, and Bass had told her something of him. Besides, that morning, she had seen him as he ascended the stairway.

"Perhaps he is still in the madame's room!" the girl suggested.

"If I only thought he was!" and a volcanic sigh shook the breast of the giant. "I'm afraid, though, that he ain't there. I'm almost as sure something has happened to him as if I had seen it myself, and knowed all about it. He ain't a man to go back on his word; and it's two hours now over the time set for his return. Still if you think he is there, it may be that he is!"

He seemed not to notice the contradiction of his statement.

"I can mighty soon find out!"

Without further ado, Laura turned from the kitchen and tip-toed softly up the stairway. She did not enter the madame's room, nor reveal herself, but looked in through a door opening from the corridor.

The madame was engaged in telling the fortune of a young woman, who had come there heavily veiled.

Laura listened long enough to be sure that Singer Sam was not in the room. Then she tip-toed back as quietly as she had come.

Henderson read her message in her face.

"He ain't there?" anxiously.

"He isn't in the madame's room, at any rate."

"I just knowed you wouldn't find him!" with a lugubrious and despairing shake of the head.

"May he not have gone away again, after ending his visit?"

Again Henderson shook his head in that doleful way.

"If he had," fixing his eyes earnestly on her, "he would have come straight to me. He told me he would do that; and he's not a man to break his word."

Even in his distress Henderson could not fail to note the exceeding charm and grace of this young woman, who was assisting him so kindly with her sympathies and her words. He thought he had never seen a fairer being.

The truth was that Tom Henderson was deeply in love with Laura Dutton, and had been for many moons. He had never told her so. He had never breathed to her a word of this deep and hidden feeling. Oxen could not have torn the secret from him. He never intended to mention it; and yet he derived a melancholy sort of satisfaction from it.

Whether Laura Dutton had any similar feeling for him was a matter that would have been difficult to determine. She was kind to him, and always treated him with the greatest consideration and respect. But a woman is an adept in concealing such things. It is seldom she wears her heart on her sleeve, as a man is often known to do.

This statement may not apply with equal

truth to all, but it does apply to that large class of modest, sensible women who are the true exponents of the best qualities of the sex.

Tom Henderson was in all respects a very different man from Jim Bass. It was plain she cared nothing for Bass, though he had never ceased to pour into her ears the story of his love. Henderson was quiet and somewhat reticent. He was as big of heart as he was of body; and the true women who gained him would draw a prize in life's lottery.

"I'm sure I don't know what to think," Laura averred, coloring slightly under the earnestness of his gaze. "Your friend isn't in the madame's room."

"He's in the house, though," and Henderson brought his well hand heavily down on his knee. "I'll bet all I'm worth on that—though that ain't sayin' much. He's in this house right now!"

This sudden vehemence caused Laura to again exhibit traces of uneasiness, which were not unmixed with alarm.

Henderson sunk his voice to a low whisper, and continued:

"I know something about this Madame Muriel! More than you do; though you have lived so long under her roof. She's a dangerous woman. A reg'lar devil!"

He checked himself, as if fearing he had been too rude.

"Beg your pardon; but it's true! Singer Sam's come into this house, and he never went out. He's in it yet; dead or alive, I don't know which."

There was a horrible suggestion in the words, that chilled her.

"I want to make a search of this house," Henderson continued, speaking in the same low tone. "Do you know any way that I can do it safely? I don't want to bring the police unless I have to."

Laura was silent for a moment.

"Are you acquainted with the house?"

"No; and that's the trouble. If I was, I'd manage to crawl through it without anybody being the wiser. But I don't know the garret from the cellar."

Again the girl was silent!

"It may seem strange to you, but I can hardly say that I'm acquainted with it, myself. There are certain portions which the madame has never allowed me to visit. There are certain rooms that I look after; but I have had orders time and again not to go into her room when she is not there."

There came a strange expression into Henderson's countenance as he listened to this confession.

"He's in one of them rooms!" he affirmed. "One of them very rooms that you're not allowed to go into. What does she keep them rooms for? To stow dead bodies in?"

The girl shuddered.

"That's my solemn opinion! Now, how am I going to get into them rooms? That's the question before the house. Can you tell me that?"

"There is only one way," Laura made answer.

"That is for me to guide you. I know where all the rooms are; though some of them are so cut up with curtains that it's hard to tell where one leaves off and another commences."

"Will you do it?" tremblingly and hesitatingly. "I s'pose I oughtn't ask it of you!"

The girl was well aware of the risk she might run in acting as guide in such an undertaking. The madame was vindictive and treacherous. Laura's lot there was not a happy one, at its best. To bring down new wrath on her head, as she would certainly do if discovered, was not advisable. She hesitated, however, but for a moment.

"I will!" courageously and unflinchingly. "Of course, you will protect me if the madame should see me. It would be just like her to fly at me in a rage and tear the clothes from my back, or pull all my hair out. You say you know the madame; but she has some tricks that you cannot be as familiar with as I am!"

She tried to assume a cheery air, but failed. Despite her effort to remain firm, she was already trembling, and the tones of her voice revealed a suspicious quiver. Still, there was a smile on her face, which to Tom Henderson's infatuated eyes was like the light of heaven.

"I don't want to get you into trouble!" he rejoined. "But I do want to take a look into them rooms. Hang it all! of course I'll protect you! If the madame makes this house too hot to hold you, I think it could be arranged for you to go somewhere else."

He would have liked to offer her his own home, in such an event, and his hand and heart with it.

Having agreed to pilot him through the building, Laura did not deem any further words necessary.

"Come up this stairway," throwing open the door leading to it. "If we're seen here, I can say that you wanted me to show you to the madame's room so that you could get your fortune told. I think this is the most dangerous place."

She had whispered these words, and now pressed her fingers to her lips to enjoin silence.

"Wait a minute," said Henderson, slipping

off his boots. "I'll have to hide these somewhere. I'd make so much noise with these on that I'd be sure to be heard."

"And if seen on the stairway with them off, what about the fortune-telling story?"

Henderson had not thought of this, and he slipped the boots on quite as quickly as he had drawn them off, and followed her without further hesitation.

The stairway was passed in safety; and the carpets of the floors beyond rendered the removal of Henderson's boots a thing not demanded.

As they stood breathless in one of the corridors, they heard the madame's visitor leave the place; and the madame, after having accompanied her to the door, returned to the den.

On arriving at the first of the rooms which Laura intended to conduct him to, it was found locked. But Henderson had a key which chanced to fit. There was nothing in this room, however, to reward their eager search.

As they turned again into the corridor, and while Henderson was still locking the door, some curtains not far away were thrust aside; and, to their consternation, they saw Madame Muriel.

CHAPTER XX.

A FEMALE FURY.

THE madame uttered a scream, which at once brought Tobe Tinchman bounding upon the scene of action.

Tinchman had been sitting half asleep in a little room adjoining the corridor. Only for this sleepiness he must have heard Henderson and Laura as they entered the other room.

Dinsmore had kept close watch over Tinchman since the night he had tempted him with the liquor. Not once had the cracksman been permitted to wholly recover from the effects of that first intoxication. He had been constantly plied with drinks, for the purpose of bolstering his courage.

But Tinchman had not been equal to the task assigned him. Invariably when an opportunity seemed to present for picking a quarrel with the medicine-vender, his liquor-born courage had oozed out at his finger-tips. He could not forget his experience in the mine.

When Tinchman stumbled out into the corridor, aroused by that scream, he was rubbing his heavy eyes as if not yet sure whether awake or the victim of a delirium.

The sight of Henderson and the girl tended to sober him and restore him to his normal condition.

He gave a whoop, and was about to make at Henderson with a rash impetuosity; but he discreetly changed his mind when he saw Henderson square himself to meet the attack.

"Put him out!" commanded the madame, dancing about in a perfect fury. "Kill him! Kill them both!"

The effect of the discovery on Laura Dutton was terrible to witness. She became as white as a corpse, trembled violently, and seemed about to sink into a faint.

"Don't you run!" Henderson whispered. "They sha'n't hurt you. They sha'n't git at you, unless they do it over my body. You stand right there! I hain't afraid of both of them!"

The girl scarcely heard his words, so great were her fears.

"Shoot him!" Madame Muriel commanded, glancing sternly at the hesitating cracksman. "Are you a coward, Tinchman? Why don't you do something?"

Tinchman appeared to understand that Henderson and Laura were there for purposes dangerous to the safety of the band; but this did not make him more desirous of risking his neck.

At this show of the white feather, the madame's fury became fairly fiendish. There can be no doubt that if she had had a weapon she would have used it.

Seeing that Tinchman meant to do nothing, she uttered a little cry of scorn and hate, and disappeared behind the curtains.

She was back again almost instantly.

Henderson had sturdily refused to retreat, but was defiantly awaiting Tinchman's advance. The latter, stung to the quick by the madame's scorn, was again dancing forward, working his fists pugilistically.

It was at this moment the madame parted the curtains. There was a bottle in her hand, and with a quick motion she hurled its contents. Even as she did so her foot tripped against the carpet, and caused her to sway so that she only saved herself from falling by clutching the curtains.

A scream of intense pain came from Tinchman. The bottle had contained vitriol. It had been intended for Henderson and Laura. The tripping of the madame's foot had diverted her aim, and the horrible stuff descended on one of Tinchman's uplifted hands, burning it and the arm in a terrible way.

The madame saw how she had blundered, and reeled back, faint and gasping.

As for the cracksman, he could do nothing but dance up and down, in a perfect paroxysm, and yell at the top of his lungs.

"We'd better slide," was Henderson's exclamation, when he saw what had happened, and understood the dastardly nature of the madame's attempt. "She may have some more of that truck!"

Laura was too much frightened by all that had occurred to be any longer the mistress of her own actions.

Henderson saw this, and pushed her gently before him along the corridor.

Neither the madame nor Tinchman endeavored to stop them; and in a few moments they were safe within the kitchen.

"It won't do for you to stay here any longer!" said Henderson, looking pityingly at the girl. "I've got you into bad trouble, and I'm sorry of it. But there's a way out! You can leave here!"

"Get what things you want to take along with you, for that she-devil may be down on us in a little while!"

Laura shivered, as she began mechanically to obey. Much of her clothing could not then be got at. She took what she could find; and together they left the building.

They went straight to Roscommon's office. Fortunately they found him in; and with him Cecil Marsden.

Cecil looked up with unfeigned surprise. He knew that something out of the ordinary had happened. The pallor of Laura's cheeks and the perturbed expression of Henderson told as much.

The girl seemed to brighten, however, now that she felt she was safe under another roof and among friends.

Without a word she took the chair which the young lawyer courteously offered her; and Henderson, with very little preliminary, plunged into an account of what had occurred.

The young lawyer and his clerk were much disturbed by the story. They were ready to believe with Henderson, that some ill fate had befallen Singer Sam.

Roscommon for a few moments gave himself up to silent thoughtfulness.

"I don't blame you for having tried to find out whether Singer Sam was in the house or not," he said, finally, addressing Henderson. "But I'm sorry that it turned out as it did. I didn't want Miss Dutton to leave there. I was beginning to count on her to aid us by a little spying. She'll not be able to do that, now!"

"But that isn't the most pressing thing, at present. We must find out about the detective. I don't know of any better way to do that than to go straight to Madame Muriel, and by threats force her to tell what she knows. I don't think it wise to call in the police, yet!"

His decision was received by Henderson with a sigh of relief.

"I'm ready to go with you!" the latter announced. "The sooner we go the better. If they had him there, they'll be likely to take him away, now; and they'll be apt to do it mighty quick."

Cecil was an interested listener, though he said nothing.

Roscommon scribbled a note.

"Take this," he said, handing it to Cecil, "and accompany the young lady to Mrs. Blair's, at the corner of Covent and Fourth Streets. She will give Miss Dutton a home until other arrangements can be made."

"Just another minute!" as Cecil was about to take up his hat.

Again he turned to the table and hastily wrote, giving the writing to Cecil when he had finished.

"It's best to take some measures of precaution before going to Madame Muriel's. If we are not back at the end of an hour, take this to the Police Headquarters. They will know what to do, when they read it. Remember, if we are not back here at the end of an hour!"

Cecil and the girl left the office shortly afterward. It had grown dark by the time they descended into the street, but the light from the electric lamps rendered surrounding objects almost as visible as at noonday. They experienced no difficulty in finding the residence at the corner of Covent and Fourth; and Mrs. Blair, when she had read the lawyer's note, received the girl with motherly kindness.

Within less than a half-hour Cecil was back at the office. He found it deserted. Roscommon and Henderson were gone; and with a heavy heart the youth sat down to watch the going of the slowly moving minutes.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MADAME DEFIANT.

"Is there anything I can do for you, gentlemen?"

Madame Muriel, composed, but pale in spite of the rouge she had been applying, sat in a comfortable chair, and toyed with some trinkets lying on a table near her.

Her question was addressed to Roscommon and Henderson.

They had wasted no time in visiting the house, but had found some trouble in gaining admittance. Their rings at the bell had been so imperious, however, that the madame had descended to open the door.

The boy was gone, she said, and it was after her business hours.

She had been on the point of closing the door again, when Roscommon had stated they must have a talk with her, and she could take her choice of conversing with them alone or in the presence of police.

She had yielded, and led the way up the stairs.

"I thought perhaps you might know without requiring us to tell you!" answering the question at the head of this chapter.

She laughed lightly and jingled the trinkets in her hand.

"It's true I might, for I'm a fortune-teller; but I don't tell even fortunes for fun."

"We have come to ask you what you have done with Sam Johnson,—Singer Sam as he is commonly called?"

The madame succeeded admirably in looking surprised.

"He came here to-day. He was seen to enter this house, and he was not seen to come out of it. He said he would come home by a certain hour. He did not do it! Likely you can tell us why!"

The madame showed her white, even teeth in a smile.

"Now you're speaking in riddles. I thought you had come up here on behalf of your very dear friend there, and the young lady he took away with him. We had a little trouble, unfortunately, and I lost my temper. It would try the temper of an angel, I fancy, to be treated as I was. That man there was actually going through my rooms like a common burglar!"

Roscommon saw that she was trying to avoid as long as possible the subject of Singer Sam's disappearance.

"That is not to the point," dryly. "We came here with only one object. That was to learn what has become of our friend, Singer Sam. You can tell us what became of him, for he did not leave this house."

"But he did leave this house!"

"I say he did not!"

"How do you know that he did not? Did you stand on the street below to ascertain if he would come down? He came here, I admit; and he went away again. That's all I know about it!"

"You're lying to me, Madame Muriel!" with uncommon sharpness and sternness. "I don't like to say that to a woman. But you're lying to me. Singer Sam did not leave this house!"

"Find him then, if he is here. If he did not leave the house, he is certainly in it yet. If you can find him you're welcome to him. I'm sure I don't know what has become of him; and I'm sure I don't know why you should come making such charges against me."

"Is it honorable, gentlemen, for you to treat a lady in that way? You two big, strapping men! You know I can't help myself, or you wouldn't dare to do it!"

"Send for Dinsmore, then, and Tinchman, and any others you like. We will say the same to them!"

"And the nigger!" Henderson put in. "Send for him. I'd like to see him. He's the chap that tried to blow up my house not long ago!"

The madame retained excellent control of her temper. When she replied, there was an icy coldness in her voice.

"I would send for them if I knew where they were. The major has not been here to-day."

She hesitated for a moment, and then approached the bell by which she had summoned Jingo to the attack on the detective.

"Some one of them may come if I ring," she said, looking at Roscommon with one of her rarest smiles.

There was something in this smile that warned the young lawyer of danger.

"You may ring that bell if you like, Madame Muriel; but before you do so, you may as well understand that it won't be safe to play any treachery against us. You have already said that none of these parties are in the house, and now you propose to ring for them!"

"I left a slip of paper with my office-boy, which he is to take to Police Headquarters if we are not back at the end of an hour. Now, that you understand the lay of the land, you may ring if you want to!"

The madame smiled again, this time defiantly; and, reaching up, pulled the bell three times.

They could not know that this was a far different signal from the one she had given in summoning Jingo to her aid.

She listened for a few moments, and then resumed her seat.

"I did not think there was any one in the house!" again occupying herself with the trinkets. "The ring did no harm, though, in spite of the fears of our legal friend!"

This was accompanied by no uncertain sneer.

"Our time is slipping by, Madame Muriel," and Roscommon looked at his watch. "If we do not accomplish something soon, the hour will expire and the police will come."

"Let them come!" with a disdainful smile.

"I shall extend to them the liberty of the house, as I did to you. They can look to their hearts' content. And when they have looked, and satisfied themselves, they can go away again!"

The madame felt secure in the belief that the

murder of Singer Sam—for she did not then know that the murder was not consummated—could not be unearthed, and she was therefore inclined to extreme boldness in her statements.

In spite of his acuteness, Roscommon was baffled by her demeanor. He did not doubt that she had guilty knowledge of the detective's fate. He began to think, though, that, whether alive or dead, Singer Sam was not in the house.

"Perhaps you think we can be put off in this way," he observed. "If you do, Madame Muriel, you're sadly mistaken. If nothing comes of this visit of ours, I intend to inform the police of the medicine man's disappearance, and of our suspicions, and I shall bring them straight to this house. You and every one in it will be placed under arrest to await the result of the investigations, and the house will be searched from garret to cellar."

"Roscommon, you're a fool!" with bitter emphasis. "A man with any legal sense, a man who has ever had any experience with criminals, ought to know better than to expect to force such a confession, as you're now trying to do. I don't know anything about your friend! But, suppose I did!—suppose I had killed him—do you think that I would up and tell all about it in reply to your questions? Roscommon, you're a fool!"

The young lawyer felt the force of her reflections. He had come there with hopeful but very vague ideas of what he expected to accomplish. He had fancied that the madame might break down under threats, and admit everything. He had found her a very different sort of woman. She was a tigress at bay.

"Very well," not deigning to notice her strictures. "If you won't confess anything, a way may be found to force you to. I shall set the investigation on foot. If you are as innocent as you assert, no harm can come of it!"

He arose, to indicate that the interview was at an end; and, accompanied by Henderson, who had not spoken a dozen words, left the house.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STARTLING REAPPEARANCE.

To return to Singer Sam, whom we left in the oozy slime at the bottom of the old mining shaft.

His condition was pitiable in the extreme. Now that the effect of the chloroform was passing away, he began to feel the pain of his injuries. He was badly bruised; and, when he looked up at the mouth of the shaft, he wondered that he was still alive.

In addition, he felt chilled to the bone.

What to do he knew not. It was plain he could not climb out without assistance. The sides of the well-like place were slippery and almost perpendicular.

He felt around, vainly hoping he might find some timbers to assist him. A few remained in place, but they were too rotten and crumbling to be of the least service.

His fingers touched a bit of board, an inch or two wide and less than a foot long, that had not yielded to the general decay. He clutched it as an anchor of hope.

The examination made of his clothing and person had revealed the fact that he had not a single useful article about him. His revolver and knife were gone; likewise his watch! Everything had been taken that might serve to identify him.

Urged by despair, he grasped the bit of board, and began to hollow out niches in the damp soil. He fancied it might be possible to dig steps by which he could mount. He dug two of these; and then tried to climb up by them so that he could scrape out another above.

The slippery soil had no firmness. It gave way under his weight, and he was precipitated splashing to the bottom.

As he did not know in what direction from the town this shaft was, he could not determine what chances there might be to obtain aid from passers-by. It was a reasonable presumption that an isolated location had been chosen by those who had thrown him there.

Nevertheless, in the hope that something might come of it, he lifted his voice in the familiar strains of his street songs, and began to sing:

A HUNDRED FATHOMS DEEP.

"There's a mine of wealth untold, in a hundred fathoms deep;
There's countless stores of the earth's red gold, in a hundred fathoms deep;
Glittering gems from a thousand brows, curses, prayers and terror vows,
In a hundred fathoms deep, in a hundred fathoms deep,
In a hundred fathoms deep, in a hundred fathoms deep."

"The sea king sits on his throne, in a hundred fathoms deep,
And laughs as he claims all for his own, in a hundred fathoms deep;
These are my riches, these are my hoards, these my treasures, my world affords,
In a hundred fathoms deep, in a hundred fathoms deep,
In a hundred fathoms deep, in a hundred fathoms deep."

He put as much force into this as possible, hoping to send the sounds a sufficient distance beyond the place if thereby they might happily attract attention.

This first song drew no one; and he selected another, in a sharper, keener key. What intervals he had between singing, he gave up to calls.

He was interrupted in one of his outbursts of song by a hail from above.

"Hello! down there! What are ye doin' in that hole? A-singin' away as if you was a mermaid a-combin' of her hair!"

Singer Sam could not mistake that voice. It was the voice of Jim Bass. He could have wept for very joy.

Instead, he shouted back, as coolly and calmly as possible.

"I'm a-tryin' my lungs under new circumstances. Think of turnin' myself into a deep sea-diver, an' am a-practicin' fer the occasion!"

"Who air ye, anyway? I'm dad-gasted, if this don't beat me! A-whoopin' it up that way at the bottom of a well!"

It is little wonder that Bass did not recognize the detective's voice. Coming from that depth, it sounded strange and unnatural. Besides, Bass had never dreamed that it might be Singer Sam.

"Come down an' see! If ye don't want to do that, git a rope an' windlass an' pull me out o' here. Then, if ye don't know me, I'll interduce myself."

Bass did not stay to waste words. He darted away; and in a very short time returned, with a big coil of rope and three or four men.

He had found the rope and the men at a miner's cabin some hundreds of yards distant.

"Hook this around ye," he cried, lowering a noose into the blackness, "an' we'll have ye out o' there in a jiffy."

The rope was sent down rapidly. When the noose reached Singer Sam, he adjusted it into the form of a seat; and, clasping the rope above his head was slowly and painfully drawn out.

The men were panting heavily from their exertions, as they grasped him and drew him over the rim.

The light of a lantern was flashed in his face. Jim Bass drew back in astonishment. The fact that the man had been singing—and perhaps a familiar something in the tones—had gradually led him to believe that it must be Singer Sam. But surely this was not Singer Sam who was revealed by the light.

There was not a man in the town who had seen the medicine-vender in his street performances that would have recognized this as the same individual. The plastered condition of his clothing aided, of course, in the metamorphosis, as did also the blood streaks discoloring his forehead and matting his hair. But the greatest change was the absence of the beard, the tall hat, and the wig.

"Dad-gast it!" drawing back in amazement. "I thought you was an old chum of mine. I'm beat!"

Singer Sam was not sorry he was not recognized. He had no special desire to have it known at that time that he was a detective in disguise who had been attacked and thrown into the shaft.

"I'm not acquainted with your town!" still further concealing his identity by changing his voice. "I was stumbling about in the dark here awhile ago and fell into the thing. I'm sure, I'm obliged to you gentlemen for getting me out. 'Twould have been rather a wet bed to sleep in."

"It's a wonder it didn't break your neck!" one of the miners observed.

"'Tis so! I've been telling myself that ever since I took the tumble. I'm wet and cold, but I've got dry clothes at my hotel. My name is King—Philip King—and, gentlemen, again I'm obliged to you. If my friend, here, that found me," indicating Bass, "will go along with me a distance, I'll be more obliged. I'm shaky; and there may be more of them holes around!"

Jim Bass was anxious for a further acquaintance with the man he had been so strangely instrumental in rescuing, and he readily acceded to the detective's wish.

Singer Sam did not realize how severe his bruises were, until he began to walk. He could hardly move, the pains produced by each step were so great. There was likewise a disagreeable and dizzy throbbing in his head. He had been struck on the head by some heavy instrument, which had caused the effusion of blood, and a big lump now indicated where the blow had fallen.

Nevertheless, he bore up bravely; and, when they had passed beyond ear-shot of the miners, he asked, in the voice so familiar to the cowboy:

"Ye think ye don't know me?"

Jim Bass recoiled with an exclamation of surprise.

"Dad-gast me! Is it you, Johnson, after all? I thought it was you when you was in the well! Sho! It can't be! I must be dreamin'!"

He peered closely into Singer Sam's face, but saw nothing of the familiar features.

"Well, ole boss, your fu'st guess was right!" reaching out his hand to clasp that of the cow-

boy. "It's me, Singer Sam, or rather what's left of me!"

"But yer—yer—beard!—Yer—"

"I understand all that. I've been changed somewhat. Transmogrified! Made over into a new man! I've had the gentle barber a-hold of me. Likewise the tailor! Likewise the butcher, the baker and the candlestick-maker. If my mother-in-law should run across me she'd take me fer a freak out of a dime museum. I don't blame you, Bass, for thinking me a mermaid. Hitch a tail on to me an' mebbe I'd pass for that. I'm a-feelin' jist now as if I'd pass for 'most anything."

He shook Bass's hand warmly as he gave utterance to these characteristic phrases.

It required a full minute for Bass to fully comprehend this change and realize he had heard aright. Then he poured out a flood of questions.

The detective replied to them, explaining everything at length, as they continued on into the town.

Bass had not visited Madame Muriel's that day, nor had he seen anything of Singer Sam's intimates. Hence, he did not know what had occurred, and what was then occurring.

Singer Sam, however, knew that Henderson had long since commenced some sort of search for him, and had probably called Cecil and Roscommon to his aid. This knowledge made him anxious to hasten his footsteps, and urged him on in spite of the injuries from which he suffered.

He smiled as he turned into the street leading toward Henderson's. A plan had come into his mind. He saw no light in the house, but he had a key with which he could gain admittance.

"Go to Roscommon's office," he said, as he parted from Bass, "and whoever you find there, tell them you have seen me, and that I am all right. You can say whatever else you may want to, but that will be enough!"

He turned toward the house, from which he did not emerge for nearly a quarter of an hour. When he came out he was again the medicine-vender—rusty clothing, tall, battered hat, thin whiskers, and all. His supply of disguises was abundant. He had had somewhat similar experiences before, and had learned to prepare for emergencies.

The hour was late for the beginning of his street performances, but he believed it was not too late for him to draw a crowd. At any rate, he could do what he intended. He had his guitar-case under his arm, and strode down the street in his old, familiar way, concealing his injuries and his limp as well as he could.

He had resolved to set up his torch beneath Madame Muriel's window, and sing a song or two for her delectation. This he would do, even though he felt at that moment he ought to be in bed. He could not resist the temptation to give her a genuine surprise.

Henderson and Roscommon had not been gone from the house fifteen minutes, when Singer Sam, as the medicine-vender, set up his torch in the street just in front of the madame's room, and began to twang his guitar.

A crowd commenced to collect; and lifting his voice so that it could not fail to be heard by the madame, he began to sing:

"Oh! come my love, and go with me! Ah! my love, I'll meet you!

I'll toss you in a mining shaft! Toss you, by and by!

Wipe y'ur eyes, and don't you cry; come, my love, I'll meet you!

I've come back, so stop that sigh! meet you by and by!

Whack dat head! Whack dat head, Jingo! Whack dat head! Jingo, whack dat head!

"Oh, look from dat window, my love and my dove! Oh, look from dat window, don't you hear? Oh! my, yes!

I can't come some other night, for dar's goin' to be a fight!

Dar'll be worse dan razors flyin' in the air!"

He sung the song through, making such verbal changes in it as were necessary to more perfectly fit it to the present instance.

It was an old and familiar song; and although the motley crowd did not understand just what he was driving at, yet the name of Jingo served to catch them; and they whooped and yelled in a most boisterous way.

Being extremely good at manufacturing catchy verses on the spur of the moment, he added to the song many things never dreamed of by the original composer; all of which were received with the same wild acclaim.

All this time he was narrowly watching the window above him. He thought he saw the curtain pushed aside, and even fancied he could see a white, scared face peering down at him.

This was not wholly imagination.

The familiar voice had reached the madame in the seclusion of her den. She was, at the time, pacing nervously up and down, brooding on what had recently occurred. She was especially fearful of the result of Roscommon's visit.

She stopped short, as the song floated to her; and approaching the window, drew the curtain aside.

The sight she beheld froze the blood in her veins and almost stilled the beating of her heart,

She could not believe she was awake. This must be some horrible vision that had come to haunt her slumbers! She stared at the crowd, at the street, at the singer. She gave herself a vicious pinch.

She could not deceive herself. She was awake! And that was Singer Sam down there! He had escaped after all! And had come back there to flaunt the fact beneath her very nose.

Was the man proof against death? Surely he must be. She remembered the blow on the head and the chloroforming. She had looked into what she believed to be a dead face. Yet there he was. Not one of his disguises was missing. There was the hat, the straggling beard, the same rusty coat; in his voice was the same peculiar nasal twang. He had gone from her room a dead man, with all his identity-concealing artifices stripped off; and here he was, just as she had been accustomed to see him night after night.

She could not speak; she could not move! Her breath came painfully, and in gasps. A mist seemed to swim before her eyes. She clutched at her throat; then reeled, and fell to the floor in a deathlike faint.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BEHIND MASKED BATTERIES.

ROSCOMMON and Henderson, with Cecil Marsden, coming around the street corner, beheld Singer Sam as he thus sung and twanged his instrument; and a feeling of gratitude that he was still in the land of the living filled their hearts.

Henderson and Roscommon had reached the latter's office just in time to intercept Jim Bass, who was hurrying thither with his message from the medicine man. It had not taken Bass long to tell how and where he had found the detective; and, without waiting for further words from the cowboy, they had rushed into the street with Cecil. Their intention had been to go direct to Henderson's, thinking they would find Singer Sam there or on the street near there.

Hence their surprise was great as they turned this corner.

Great as it was, however, they did not deem it wise to interrupt the singer until he had finished his songs, sold a few bottles of his medicine, and blew out his torch preparatory to evacuating the place.

"I'm played out!" was Singer Sam's announcement, after mutual greetings. "I'm goin' home and goin' to bed, an' intend to stay there till I feel more like myself. It seems to me that the whole world is spinnin' around like a great big buzz-top, an' that my head is the little nob on the top's back. Ever had yer head feel that way? If you did, you can sympathize with me."

He went home, and to bed, according to his desire; but not until he had given to these friends a full account of all that had befallen him.

He remained in bed until the evening of the following day; then got up, feeling something like his old self, and began to prepare for further movements against the madame and the major.

Before sallying out into the street, however, he had a long talk with Henderson and Marsden;—Marsden having but a short time before come home for his supper.

Darkness had fallen, when the medicine-vender took his guitar and wended his way toward Madame Muriel's. He had resolved, against the advice of his companions, to again visit her.

In thus poking his head once more into danger, he did not do so without having first given due consideration to the matter.

He deviated from his direct course, and dropped in at a little police station, where he had a short consultation with one of the chiefs of the force. Then he resumed his apparently aimless strolling, and brought up in the alley at the rear of the madame's establishment.

Before this rear door he posted himself, ostentatiously tuned his instrument, and began to sing. There was no light on that side of the house; but there was a window from which he knew the madame could look down and see him, if so disposed. He was determined to have an interview with her. He believed that the iron was hot for the striking, and he was ready for the blow.

These were the words that floated upward from the alley.

"Oh, look from thy window, my love,
On thy languishing lover below—

Oh, toss up the sash,

Though the glasses should crash,
And show him thy features of snow-o-o,
And show him thy features of snow.

"Oh, the black bats of night hover near,
And the owl is abroad in the dark;

And these owls and these bats,

And their comrades, the rats,

Are foes of the poor, quav'ring lark—ark—ark,

Are foes of the poor quav'ring lark.

"My foes, are these black bats of night—

Black Jingo and those of his ilk—

And thy lover, alone,

Making musical moan,

Is the lark, with its throat of silk—ilk—ilk,

Is the lark, with its throat of silk.

"Thou'lt not choose the black bats, I am sure,
Nor the owls, with their horrible squeak:
Thou wilt take the poor lark,
Who doth sing in the dark,
With a sweetly melodious beak—eak—eak,
With a sweetly melodious beak.
So, look from thy window, my love,
On thy languishing lover below!
Yes, toss up the sash,
Though the glasses should crash,
And show him thy features of snow-o-o,
And show him thy features of snow."

He had barely concluded this touching ballad, when the door, in front of which he was standing, was pushed open with no gentle hand and a servant girl looked out. She had been employed only the day before, to take the place of the recreant Miss Dutton.

"You jist git out o' here!" was her unfeminine greeting. "We hain't got no cold victuals to give to tramps. So, you jist clear out!" Singer Sam knew that this was a game of bluff instigated by the madame. He had no doubt in the world that the madame had heard his singing and recognized his voice.

"Don't appreciate good music, I see!" and he grinned, advancing toward the servant, so that the light of the lamp fell full on his face. "I've known that there song to draw tears from the eyes of a book-agent; an' yit, you don't appreciate it! Did ever a man git sech a mortal blow? I think I'll sell my guitar an' go to callin' swine for a livin'!"

The servant stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment. She had never encountered just another such man.

"I hain't a-singin' fer victuals! I'm a-singin' to my sweetheart up there. The madame! You tell her so, will ye! Tell her that Sam Johnson wants to see her. It'll tickle her so, that she'll order you to show me right up-stairs. See if she don't!"

The girl hesitated for a moment; and seeing that the tramp did not intend to leave, she withdrew from the door, closed and locked it to prevent an invasion during her absence, and tripped up the stairway.

She came back in a short time; and, in quite a changed tone, told Singer Sam that the madame would see him.

"What did I tell you?" tucking his guitar under his arm, and giving an exuberant cluck with his tongue. "She never sends Sam Johnson away!"

At the top of the stairway the girl drew aside to allow him to pass, for the madame was visible in the corridor just beyond.

There was not sufficient light there to enable the detective to fully discern her features; but when they had entered the room, where a lamp shed its radiance, he discovered that she was deathly pale.

The change in her appearance since he had beheld her last was unmistakable and startling. Plainly she had suffered intensely. There was a languor in her movements, and a dullness in her eyes, beneath which were heavy, black lines. She had not expected a visitor, and therefore had not prepared herself for this meeting by an application of cosmetics. This may have accounted in part for the leaden hue of her cheeks, but it could not account for all of the telltale indications.

"I am afraid, my dear madame, that you haven't been slumbering well?" interrogatively, as he sunk without invitation into an easy-chair. "You were so unkind the other day as to cut off our interview at the most interesting part; and so I have come to renew it!"

"What is it you want?" drawing back somewhat fearfully, and seating herself, as he had done.

"You are not pleased to see me? I told the girl you would be. You oughtn't to make me out a liar in that way!"

He had cast aside his disguising dialect, and addressed her in his natural tones. There was no further need of playing a double part in her presence.

She made no reply; and he looked about to satisfy himself they were alone.

"I don't care to have that ebony African jump out at me again so lovingly!" a smile coming to his lips. "His love-taps are not admired by yours truly!"

She looked toward the curtains through which Jingo had made his appearance, as if she wished him there at that moment.

"Don't you do it, my dear madame! It would not be safe! I have come prepared this time to foil any of your affectionate tricks. No salted wine for me this time; no chloroform; no Jingo-whacking on the head! I may as well tell you at the start that none of those things will work. In the first place, you can't kill me, if you want to. Your experience of the other day ought to teach you that. I'm even proof against mining shafts!"

"But to make assurance doubly sure, I visited a police station before coming here, and dropped two or three good-sized fleas into the ears of the blue-coated gentry. Likely, it will be news to you when I say they are now all around this house, and watching it as if they were a regiment of cats watching a mouse-hole. There's one of them standing at the foot of the front

stairway at this moment. If you doubt it, you can investigate and satisfy yourself. Or you can send your servant. Likely, though, she would take them for tramps!"

The madame had no reply to make to this. She glared at him as a caged tigress might glare at the springbok beyond its reach.

"What is it you want?" was her hoarse demand.

"I shouldn't think you'd need to ask!" somewhat cuttingly. "Your attempt to murder me proves conclusively that you know who I am. I don't see, Madame Muriel, that there's any necessity for either of us to go beating about the bush. You know who I am?"

A cold bow was her only reply.

"That makes it easier! I am Wilfred Benton, the detective. You have known that almost from the first. At least, since the night of that delightful singing-match. When I first came to the town, I thought I would work wholly in the dark. I did not intend to give you any clew to my identity. But circumstances changed my plan. Still, as I had started in as a medicine-vender, as a pilgrim and a stranger on this footstool, I thought it well to keep up the delusion. There is no necessity for further fighting from behind masked batteries."

She was struggling desperately to obtain the mastery of her feelings. Her hands were clinched until the nails sunk deeply into the flesh. Occasionally her lips opened, as he talked, but they gave forth no sounds.

"You know what I am here for," running the fingers of one hand through his beard. "But I don't want to talk to you alone. I want Major Dinsmore to hear what I have to say!"

"He is not here!" she declared, with a little shiver.

"Oh, but he is!" in the same calm, even voice. "I have it on the best authority that he came into this house not more than an hour ago, and that he has not yet gone out of it. There have been some police shadows on the street, my dear madame. I got my information from them!"

"He went out the back way!"

"But there were police shadows on that side! Come, come, my dear madame! The major is in the house; and I must see him and talk with him. I won't be evaded!"

There was something so threatening in his manner that the madame almost cowered.

"I can ring for him; but I tell you I don't think he is in the house!"

"Ring for him, then! But be careful that you don't signal for that negro. It won't be healthy for you to do that."

She did not immediately move, but sat rigidly staring at him.

"I have come out from behind my masked batteries, and now you and the major must come out from behind yours. That was a bomb-mortar and a gatling gun combined that you used on me the other day. There's a lump on my head yet as big as a goose-egg. Drop the battery business, Madame Muriel, and let's get down to something more sensible and effective. Ring for the major, and remember that there are policemen within hearing. One call from me will bring them swarming into the house."

She arose unsteadily, and pulled twice at the bell.

There was no response for a long time, and the detective was beginning to think Dinsmore would not come; when suddenly the man made his appearance.

He was almost as pale and agitated as was the madame.

"I had feared you had gone on a long journey, or was sleeping!" and the detective smiled sweetly. "Major, I'm happy to meet you. Intensely happy. I don't think you need any introduction to Benton, the Detective!"

Dinsmore tried to assume a gay and light-hearted air, but he failed miserably.

"Oh, yes, I know you! We had a pleasant little time together some years ago."

"Pleasant indeed!" rubbing his hands together as if the memory was delightful.

"I come to see you again on a little business. I know you will be gratified to hear of it!"

"Oh, cut that short!"

Dinsmore tried to laugh, but the effort resulted in something more nearly resembling a snarl. "If you've come on business, Benton, let us hear of it. This tension is too great to be enjoyable."

"Very well, then!" thrusting his hands into his pockets and stretching out his legs. "Business it is! A long time ago—quite a time ago, major, though the years have sat lightly on you!—you entered a home in a certain Michigan town, not far from Chicago!"

"You remember Chicago, major! You had a little adventure in that place which caused you to do time at a certain institution I shall not name!"

"But that is not to the present purpose! You entered this Michigan home, claiming to be a relative of the family. An uncle, was it not, major? The husband and father of that home had died, leaving a brother wandering somewhere on the mountains of this weary world. You represented to the widow and mother that you were that brother, returned from your long

journeys; and she believed you and trusted in you. There were two children, and perhaps some relatives. There was quite a fortune, too—twenty or thirty thousand dollars—and it was the fortune you were after! You succeeded in making this mother think the fortune had nothing to do with your brotherly kindness. Brotherly, indeed! Dinsmore, you went there as a wolf in sheep's clothing—a blood-sucking, life-destroying wolf. I don't know but what it is a slander on the wolf family to make the comparison!"

Up to this time neither the madame nor the major had spoken a word; and now the detective stopped to see what effect these disclosures were having.

"You are on the wrong trail, I can assure you!" Dinsmore declared, twisting uneasily. "I think I know what you refer to, but I had no hand in it!"

"The name of this Michigan family was Quindaro," paying no attention to Dinsmore's denials. "There was a shadow of a great sorrow over them at the time. You took advantage of this sorrow. You did worse! By some hellish system of slow poisoning you killed the woman! Then you gathered in the estate, took the youngest of the children, and disappeared. That last is a point on which I am not clear. There were two children, and some say you took both of them. You know more about that, no doubt, than any one else!"

"I don't know anything about it!" was Dinsmore's very positive assertion. "I tell you, Benton, that you're away off the track! You are barking up the wrong tree!"

"Oh, I guess not!" displaying a quizzical smile. "I think I know very well what I'm talking about. One of those children, the girl, was under this very roof only the other day. You call her Laura Dutton, but her name is Nellie Quindaro!"

A cynical, mocking look distorted the major's rather handsome face.

"You're wrong, Benton! You're dead wrong! That girl's name is no more Quindaro than yours is Sam Johnson!"

The detective was not to be balked at this point.

"I said I had come to talk business. I have. This is the business: Restore that twenty thousand dollars to its rightful owners, and I'll go away from here and not bother you further. I'll look after the girl's interests. It was more than twenty thousand—but if you'll put up twenty thousand, I'll be satisfied; and those most interested will be satisfied. You ought to be punished to the full extent of the law, but I'm not afraid but that you'll succeed in hanging yourself, or worse, before you've reached the end of your career. Justice is popularly supposed to be blind or asleep; but my experience has taught me that she always has one eye a good deal more than half open. Justice will settle your account, and the madame's!"

Madame Muriel had sat as stiff and stony as a statue. Obviously she was relying on Dinsmore to get them out of this scrape.

"Will you pay over the money? That's the question!" and Singer Sam brought his hand down on his knee with heavy force. "I'll see that the girl is made aware of her position, and that she gets her rights! Will you pay over the money?"

"The brother, whom you claimed to be, returned to Michigan not long ago; and I am here at his solicitation. I had a time in finding the whereabouts of yourself and the madame. Now that I have found you, I don't mean to let you go until you have made restitution!"

He saw by Dinsmore's looks that that individual had no notion of paying over so large an amount of money, except as a last resort.

"You won't do anything? Why, Dinsmore! it seems to me I'm very easy on you! I could bring both you and the madame to the gallows, for that poisoning affair; to say nothing of the attempt to murder me the other day!"

The major could not conceal a sneer.

"It's a long stretch of time back to that alleged poisoning. I think you would find it extremely difficult to substantiate the charges you have brought. And as for that matter of the other day—I don't know where you'd get your witnesses to prove that."

"Then you don't propose to do anything?"

"I can't pay any twenty thousand. I haven't that much, if I wanted to pay it!"

"You mean that it would bankrupt you to hand over that sum in hard cash? You're a rich man, Dinsmore, as the world counts riches! I wouldn't carry the conscience-load you do, though, for all you've got. You can pay that twenty thousand, if you will. If you won't do it voluntarily I shall have to take steps to make you do it, and to punish you at the same time. You can take your choice! I'm not going to talk any longer!"

He arose and took up his hat as if to depart. Dinsmore whispered something to Madame Muriel, in reply to which the madame shook her head.

"It's fight, is it? Very well, then!"

He turned toward the madame.

"I guess I'll have to notify you that I'm going to open up in a hall. You wouldn't care to join me in another singing-match?"

The madame glanced up inquiringly. "I think it advisable to set up in the medicine business in some public hall. I sha'n't go far from here, you may depend upon it. Singing on the street as I do, and expected to leave at any hour, my disappearance, should I tumble into another mining-shaft, would not attract much attention. You might even be able to get out of the country, before it was noticed."

"So I guess I'll set up business in a hall, and announce to a long-suffering public that I intend to stay a month, if the medicine-factory don't run out of goods."

"Long before that time, I hope both of you will have come to your senses. In the mean time, you needn't try to jump the town; for you can't do it without my knowledge."

He backed through the doorway, strode heavily along the corridor and down the stairway, and disappeared in the alley; from whence he made his way to the place of his nightly meetings.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHANGES.

"WHAT do you think of that?"

Tom Henderson came into Roscommon's office, where were Singer Sam and Cecil Marsden; and as he asked the question, thrust a note into the lawyer's hands.

Roscommon read it, and with a queer smile, passed it to the detective.

Two days had elapsed since the interview just detailed, during which the warfare between the two opposing parties had been in the condition of truce.

The note, which read as follows, appeared to astonish the detective:

"MR. PAUL ROSCOMMON—:

"I learn that you have assumed guardianship over Miss Laura Dutton, whose home was until lately at my house. I desire that she should return. We find her valuable, much more so than the girl we have employed. The conditions under which she left were out of the common. She was piloting a stranger through our rooms, which so angered Madame Muriel that she said and did things in the heat of passion for which she is now truly sorry. We promise that if the girl returns, she shall be well treated. Trusting this request may meet your favor, I am,

"Sincerely yours,

"MAJOR DINSMORE."

Singer Sam passed it to Marsden, whose interest in it was as great as that of the others.

"What do you make of it?" Roscommon asked, addressing Singer Sam.

The detective did not reply, for a moment.

"I may be wrong, of course; but the most plausible theory seems to me to be, that they desire to keep her near them. Perhaps they hope to make their escape, and to take her along. She does not know yet, I believe, that she is the girl I am searching for!"

An odd look passed between Henderson and Marsden.

"That hain't all of it," said Henderson. "I reckon you'll hardly believe it, but the major has hired me to do work about the house!"

There was a look of genuine amazement on the faces of Roscommon and the detective.

"That's jist what he has! You know he's a part owner in the mine. I happened to meet him this morning; and he asked me how I was a-gittin' along; an' I told him I expected to go back in the mine in a day or two; an' then he offered me the job at the house."

"And you took it?" was Roscommon's breathless question.

"Kind o' queer hain't it? But that's jist what I did! I hain't afraid of him, ner the madame, either; an' the work'll be a good deal lighter there than in the mine."

Singer Sam laughed in a cynical way.

"The prospect that the gal might be induced to return to the house had nuthin' to do with yer decision, I reckon?"

The color of confusion mantled the cheek of honest Tom Henderson. He was well aware that these friends had knowledge of his infatuation for Laura Dutton.

"Pon honor!" he asseverated. "You're away off, there! I hadn't no idea at the time that they was a-goin' to offer her the place. It might 'a' been a reason, if I'd 'a' knowed it; but I didn't know it. 'Twill come handy, though, fer me to be around there, if she should go back. I wouldn't stand still and let them abuse her!"

There was a different intonation from that with which Bass would have clothed his swelling words, had he been in a condition to make such a statement.

"Go for the girl and bring her here," said Singer Sam, turning to Cecil. "If she will take that place again, I don't know that we could ask anything better."

Cecil left the office immediately; and while he was absent they discussed this offer of the major in all its possible bearings.

When the girl appeared—and they were not compelled to wait long for her—they had resolved on a course of action.

Roscommon gave her the note; and after she had read it, he asked her if she was willing to return again to the house.

Her face was paler; and she stood hesitating,

glancing from one to the other, as if uncertain how to decide.

Thinking that inasmuch as he had already revealed his purpose to these friends, and thereby secured their co-operation, it was advisable to commit his interests also to her, Singer Sam told her who and what he was, and something of why he was there. He did not tell her, however, that he believed her to be Nellie Quindaro, the girl he was seeking.

There was much in his narrative to touch her keenest sympathies and arouse her to a willingness to do what she could to aid him.

"Do you think you would fear to undertake this task?" he asked, smiling at her, encouragingly.

There was a great deal of heroic fiber in Laura Dutton. It was plain to the most uninterested observer that she was afraid of the major and the madame—having had abundant cause for being so. Nevertheless, she spoke up with unexpected boldness.

"I am willing to try!"

Roscommon clapped his hands, approvingly.

"That is the proper spirit, Miss Dutton. That's all any of us can do. Try."

"If either one of 'em lays his littlest finger on you they'll hear from me!"

Tom Henderson could have bitten his tongue off as soon as the words were uttered, so chagrined was he. The words had welled up so strongly from his heart that he had given them utterance almost before he was aware of it.

This was the first intimation the girl had that Henderson was to be where he could be of any assistance to her. The remark called for explanation; and the miner was left to explain it in his own clumsy way.

The girl flushed a vivid scarlet. The ill-timed remark placed her in an embarrassing position. If she acceded now to the detective's request, it might by some be deemed that she did it to be near Henderson. But she remembered that she had already expressed a willingness to face the dangers of a return to Madame Muriel's.

"I will go!" seeking refuge by looking steadily at Singer Sam. "I am afraid I can't do much good there, though!"

"You understand what I want of you? I want you to watch the madame and the major as closely as you can. I want Henderson to do the same. Between you, you ought to be able to make some useful discoveries. There is a great deal of mystery about that house. One of the most mysterious things to me, is, how they removed me from there when they thought they had put me out of the way."

"I am positive I was dragged into a room by the negro; though, when I was there the last time, I couldn't see anything of that room."

"And that negro! Keep your eyes on him, if you can. I fancy it will be a difficult piece of work. If there ever was a slippery piece of ebony, it's that same Jingo. I never see him about the streets, except sometimes when he is driving the madame in the dusk of the evening. I want you to pay especial attention to him; both of you!"

"As much as I have been there, I have never seen him very often, myself," said Laura, thoughtfully. "I'll promise to do what I can, though."

There was a great deal more to the same effect, which is not material to the interests of this story. Then Laura took her departure, to make arrangements for again changing her place of abode.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DANGEROUS SCHEME.

IMMEDIATELY after Singer Sam's departure from the presence of Madame Muriel and Major Dinsmore, these two arch-schemers commenced to set on foot a plan that might prove extremely dangerous.

On the day Henderson entered the major's service, Tinchman and the Jew were called in consultation, and the plot thoroughly discussed.

Tinchman's various burglarious enterprises was what first suggested it. There was no more daring night-raider in the West than this same Tobe Tinchman; and none more successful. He had followed the business for years; and, although he had been nabbed by the officers, he generally managed to escape, or get off with light sentences. Success had made him bold and determined.

"We've a little plan for you, Tinchman, and for our friend, Baumgard," the madame asserted, addressing them in her usual witching manner.

The Jew did not look pleased at being thus spoken to. He knew from experience that it was the harbinger of some request which he might not desire to hear. The madame did not give him any time for protest, if such was intended.

"Our good friend, Tinchman," looking at the Jew, "has not had sufficient vertebra to tackle this detective, as he agreed to do, and as the major stood ready to pay him for doing."

"Twasn't healthy fer them as did!" Tinchman growled, in his sullen way, referring to the late disastrous attempt on the detective's life. "I didn't see no call fer me to put my

finger into the pie. Had it burnt bad enough, a'ready!"

He held up the hand which had received the contents of the vitriol-bottle. It was not a pleasant hand to look upon, scarred as it was. It would be slow in healing, and the chances were that Tinchman would carry the marks of it to his dying day.

The madame was not pleased with this reminder of her heedlessness and recklessness. But the scowl which flitted for a moment across her face was quickly replaced by one of her sunniest smiles.

"Accidents will happen, Tinchman!" the major apologized. "You know the madame didn't mean that for you!"

"It hurt jist as bad as if she had!" with that same black look. "If she'd 'a' aimed it at me, I think I should 'a' knifed her!"

"Our friend isn't in an amiable mood to-day!" and the madame essayed to laugh.

"What is it you want?" Tinchman demanded, glaring at the little Jew as if he desired to eat him. "If me an' Baumgard is a-goin' into any scheme together, I must know all about it fust. When it comes to divvyin' the swag, you can't trust him!"

This little thrust was due to a slight dispute between the Jew and the cracksman, which had recently threatened to sever their amicable relations.

"We want to strike some hard blows at certain friends of this man Benton. We want to hit them so hard that they will feel it—and he will feel it. I have already given Baumgard a hint of what I mean. He is inclined to be a little weak-kneed, but you can stiffen him up, Tinchman."

This was said by the major, who now felt that the time had come for him to put in an oar.

"Spit it out!" glowering as sullenly as before.

"You've been figuring on a burglary!" looking at him fixedly. "That raid on Langston's, you know! Why not vary the regular routine a little? Why not make it seem that some one else did the work?"

"Now, my idea is this: you could rig up to look very much like Tom Henderson; and, with a little disguising, Baumgard could be made to resemble the hunchback. What would you say to going to Langston's disguised in that way? After you have made your haul, you could show yourselves; and the old man would be sure to take you for the parties you would resemble!"

Tinchman thought for a few moments, scowling at the floor and knitting his fingers together.

"What is the object?" not taking his eyes from the floor.

"The principal object is to give this detective something else to think about. He's crowding us too close. If his friends get into a hobble, naturally he would spend some time in trying to get them out of it. Of course, old Langston will have Henderson and Marsden pulled for the burglary!"

There was an ulterior object which he did not just then care to mention. He and the madame were already arranging their affairs to secretly leave the town. They hoped they might be able to do this while Singer Sam was engaged in defending his friends. It promised to give them an excellent opportunity.

Tinchman's dark eyes gleamed with vindictiveness. He had no love for the detective. He never had for men of that calling; and Singer Sam had made himself particularly distasteful to the cracksman. If he could strike him a blow by striking at these friends, he was willing to do it. Then, too, nothing could please him better than to bring trouble upon Tom Henderson and Cecil Marsden. These two he hated with a most unreasonable and bitter hatred.

He glanced furtively at the Jew.

Baumgard had not exhibited any great pleasure at the prospect opened before him. He was not a burglar by profession. He was only an ally of burglars; shrewd, crafty and unscrupulous. He had not the courage for such work as Tinchman's.

The cracksman thought he understood something of the Jew's feeling. It would furnish a revengeful sort of pleasure to be able to drag the Jew into this scheme against his will.

So, he turned to Dinsmore, and said, with quiet determination:

"I think me an' Baum kin do it! Don't you think so, ole booknose?"

Baumgard did not relish the appellation, but he was too deep a man to exhibit his resentment. Whenever he struck back, the blow was apt to descend in the dark.

Having gained the consent of the principal actor, Dinsmore and Madame Muriel now entered into a more thorough discussion of the plan they had formed.

It was to be carried out that night, for they could not afford to lose any time by delay. Tinchman was not ready to make his raid upon the Langston house; but he was won over from his reluctance; and the time was set for that night, at a late hour.

It was past midnight, when Tinchman, disguised to look as much as possible like Tom

Henderson, entered the grounds of the Langston residence, and approached the rear area.

He was followed by the Jew, who hunched forward in a crouching attitude. The Jew's disguise was almost as nearly perfect as it could be. Being a small man, of about the same height as Cecil Marsden, it had not been so difficult for him to make the necessary changes in his appearance. The peculiar hunch on the back had been easily arranged. They wore no masks, as they had little fear of being detected, and their intentions were not to permit their faces to be seen when the time came for them to reveal themselves.

These details were of course subject to change; and were changed in some minor particulars.

Tinchman's preparations for the burglary had been so complete and elaborate that not a hitch occurred in the program. They gained access to the house by way of the basement, mounting from thence to the place where Langston kept his valuables.

These were secured without delay—for the cracksman knew just where to put his hands on them!

"Now, to give the old gent such a skeer as'll turn his hair white!" he whispered to the Jew, turning in the direction of Langston's bedroom. "I don't 'low the old chap keeps any vallybles in his room, but we'll let on that we think so. Likely he's got a gold ticker. We can take that; an' you can ship it to yer brother in New Yorruck."

This was in imitation of Baumgard's pronunciation of the name of the great city.

The Jew had followed him meekly, willing to be guided by Tinchman's superior experience.

The cracksman found no trouble in fitting a key to the lock of the bedroom door. The key was turned; and together they stood listening to ascertain if the slight noise had aroused the sleeper.

A heavy snoring attested to the fact that Langston was possessed of a good stomach and a quiet conscience.

The cracksman now twisted a handkerchief over the lower part of the Jew's face in a way to serve as a mask; and, after having treated himself in the same way, pushed the door softly open and tip-toed into the room.

As he did so, he drew a bull's-eye lantern from beneath his coat—one he had already been making use of—and turned its light full into the face of the sleeping man.

Baumgard hovered near the doorway, where he could be seen by Langston as soon as awake, and where he would still be far enough to render a too close look impossible.

The sleeping man put up a hand as if to ward off a disturbing mosquito; but when the unpleasant rays continued to pour into his face, he awoke with a start and a snort.

He was a fat, bulky man, with round, smooth features; and the look of dismay which came to him, as his eyes fell on the startling apparitions, was comical in the extreme.

Tinchman snickered outright, in spite of his best efforts to contain himself.

The look of fear on the rich man's face grew and intensified. A trembling and a paleness seized him; the latter being quickly superseded by an apoplectic hue.

"Shell out your wealth!" was the cracksman's laconic command, when he was sure Langston had been given ample chance to fix in his memory their general appearance. "Where is yer dust? an' yer ticker?"

He tried to give to his tones a strong resemblance to Henderson's; and really made a very fair stagger in that direction. One is not inclined to be critical when frightened, and the odds were great that Langston would not notice any small lapses in this direction.

Langston recoiled with an inarticulate cry, as Tinchman made this rough demand.

"I have nothing!" appealingly putting up his hands.

"Shell out, or off goes the top o' yer head! Would you ruther keep your brains or your dollars? Where's yer money?"

"I have none here. There's a dollar or two in my pants pockets there. You're welcome to that."

He did not know that the burglars had already secured the money which he deemed so safe.

Tinchman rifled the pockets, drawing out a few small bills in addition to some loose change.

Then he picked up the man's vest, and relieved it of a handsome gold watch. This he held in his hand, as he backed toward the doorway.

"So long!"

With this farewell, he pushed the Jew into the corridor, locked the door and withdrew the key from the lock, with a feeling that he had worked the game very successfully.

And after events showed that in this he was not mistaken.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PREPARING FOR A RAID.

THE scheme had been well laid and well carried out; and its effects were not long in showing themselves.

As soon as the burglars had taken themselves from the premises, Langston, who had been badly frightened, got up from his couch, and with trembling limbs, crossed the room.

He pressed the button of the electric bell so frequently and vehemently that in an almost incredibly short space of time, the household and the servants were aroused. The latter found him panting and puffing in the solitude of his apartment, from which he feared to emerge until assured that there was no personal danger.

"I have been robbed!" he howled, almost tumbling into a fit of apoplexy at the thought. "Robbed! And in my own house, and my own room! And I know who the thieves are! They are that scoundrel Tom Henderson, and the hump-backed boy he always keeps with him!"

Then, in trembling and hasty sentences, he commanded one of the servants to hurry into the street and send a policeman.

Before the policeman arrived, he had visited the spot where he kept his valuables, and found them missing.

As he faced the guardian of the law, he was in a perfect fury.

"Sir! I have been robbed! In my own house! And yet we pay taxes to support you lazy, good-for-nothing fellows; and you are never about when you are needed. Isn't it your business, sir, to see that such things can't happen?"

"Now, I demand the immediate arrest of the burglars. I saw them; and they are well known to me. They are Thomas Henderson and Cecil Marsden!"

The blue-coated officer was struck with amazement. Heretofore he had never heard a whisper against the character of these two.

"You are sure? There can be no mistake?" he stammered.

Langston was a hot-headed old fellow, inclined to captiousness, and he did not relish this. It seemed to cast a doubt on his veracity, or his powers of discernment.

"How dare you, sir?" he sputtered. "How dare you? Of course I'm not mistaken! I'm old enough to know a thing when I see it with my own eyes! You'll arrest those two men immediately!"

The officer was not disturbed by this outburst.

"There's no call for unseemly haste, Mr. Langston! These men have hitherto borne excellent reputations. I suppose you are willing to go with me to Headquarters, and there swear out a warrant?"

The red-faced Mr. Langston glared at him as if he wished he could annihilate him on the spot.

"Do you doubt my word, sir? Do you doubt my word?"

Then, with a scornful glance:

"Yes, sir, I will go with you! I suppose that is what we pay you for, to have you drag honest citizens over the town at this hour of the night. Yes, sir, I will go with you; and, if I have any influence in Mineral Gap, you'll lose your place on the police force before the end of the week."

In this fiery mood, he stumped away behind the policeman; and as soon as the distance to the station could be covered by them, he stood before the desk of the proper officer, ready to swear to the warrants which he demanded should be issued.

He asked that they be served at once; and at about the hour of three in the morning, Tom Henderson and Cecil, and Singer Sam, were aroused by the rap of a policeman's club on their door.

Although Henderson had entered Major Dinsmore's service, he still slept at home.

Henderson went to the door; and, even though he was not yet dressed, was placed under arrest. There were two officers outside, and they stated courteously but firmly the nature of their mission, and they asked for Cecil.

The detective got up and hastily donned his clothing. Cecil was sound asleep in an adjoining room, from which he came forth when called. The announcement of the charge against him, and the information that the officers were at the door, threw him into a flutter of terror.

"I think I understand the thing!" Singer Sam averred, consolingly. "It's a put-up job, and nothing can come of it, except a little annoyance. The best thing for you to do is to go quietly to the police station. I can arrange to have you released on bail."

This was done; and within less than an hour, they had returned to the house, and were engaged in a serious discussion of this new problem.

Singer Sam was positive that the affair had been instigated by Dinsmore or the madame, or both; though he could not at that time see through all of the underlying motives. Neither did he know who had committed the burglary, though he naturally suspected Tinchman and the Jew.

He had some days before come upon evidences showing that the Jew was a member of the band over which Dinsmore held sway.

"I'll tell you what I think," he said, after

they had talked for a long time, and after he had given a good deal of thought to the matter. "Tinchman and the Jew did the work, which was planned by the madame and the major. I don't know of any other man with whom Tinchman is intimate, who could successfully assume the role of our friend, Cecil. The Jew is a small, slight man, and might do it; and I'm sure that he did!"

"Now, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Baumgard has been acting as a 'fence' for thieves for a long time. His pawn-shop is only a blind. It seems to me the chances will be good to find in that pawn-shop some witness of last night's burglary;—if we move soon enough! I think they stow away their stolen goods there temporarily; and, if I'm right in that, we ought to find some of Langston's things there. I think we shall, if we work it right!"

So strong was his belief in the correctness of this theory, that he began at once to plan to carry it into effect.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BAFFLED.

"BUY a bottle of my Magic Cure?"

This was the request preferred by Singer Sam as he entered the Jew's place of business, that night.

The detective, who was now proceeding to carry out the plan he had formed, had an object, in addition to those stated to Henderson and Cecil. His shrewd wit told him that the madame and the major, now that they had virtually defied him to do his worst, would soon endeavor to leave the town. In moving against the Jew, therefore, he was employing the same tactics used by them. They meant to fully consume his time by forcing him to look after the interests of his friends. And now he purposed to counter this by striking at theirs.

Baumgard looked frightenedly up, as the detective's words reached him.

"Have a bottle o' my medicine?" reaching out the article. "I hain't been a-doin' very well at my night performances; and so, if I manage to pay my board bill, I've got to hustle around an' make some sales. Sung a whole hour downtown, this evening, an' didn't sell enough truck to pay me fer the guitar-string I broke. Bizness is bad! Wuss luck!"

The Jew shrewdly guessed that the medicine-vender had not entered the pawn-shop just for the chance of selling him 'one bottle of the Magic Cure. He knew the man to be a detective.

"Ach, mine gootness!" lifting up his hands. "If peesness vas rat mit you, vbat you s'bose it vhas mit me? I haf nod sold so much as t'e brice of dhose pottles, to-day! So hellup me, dhot ish t'e troot! If I nod do petter ash dhot negxt week, I shall pull up vrom dhis bere down! Dhot ish t'e troot!"

"Jist a bottle!" the medicine man pleaded.

"If I can sell only six more bottles, I can settle with my landlady an' my wash-lady. That last creeter I'm actilly ashamed to look in the face! Hain't been able to pay her but a dollar sence comin' into this burg. It made me weep, when I had to put her off, the last time; an' it made her weep, too! If she hadn't had a husband an' six children to support I'd 'a' made her take medicine. But a husband an' six children can't live even on Magic Cure, substantial as it is. Now, my dear sir, let me sell you a bottle! Only one bottle! Think of that poor woman, an' let the thought make you generous!"

The Jew was nervous and agitated, mentally asking himself all the while what this man wanted.

"So hellup me, I couldn't do dhot!" he protested. "I should like to agcommodate you! Dhot is t'e troot! But you must understant my cirgumstances. I haf not t'e money to enaple me to do dhot! Dhot ish t'e troot!"

With an air of sadness, Singer Sam put away the bottle of medicine.

"You're a-missin' a good chance!" he declared.

"That Magic Cure is wu'th jist twic't what I ask fer it. You'll never have another sich opportunity—unless you come down to my meetings some night! No; you'll never have another sich opportunity; fer I'm a-goin' to offer you this at half-price! At half-price, mind you! You Hebrews generally like to git things that way. What do to say to yer takin' it at half-price?"

He brought out the bottle again, and held it up alluringly.

"I coul't not do it!" the Jew asserted. "I should like to agcommodate you, and dhot voman; but I certainly coul't not do it!"

"Very well, then!" tucking the bottle away again. "If you won't buy of me, mebbe you'll lemme look at some o' the things you've got in the shop. Some o' the things you've got in that tray! They're there to be looked at, ain't they?"

The Jew hesitated for a moment, suspecting that some trap was meant. Goods taken from various houses were concealed there, though not in that part of the establishment. It occurred to him that no harm might come from exhibiting the contents of the tray; and that it was perhaps advisable not to refuse to comply with so simple a request.

So he pulled the tray out of the showcase, and

placed it in front of Singer Sam. It was an ordinary tray, filled with rings and chains.

As Baumgard thrust forward the tray, also thrusting his hands forward in so doing, the detective, with a quick movement, produced a pair of handcuffs, which he slipped on the extended wrists.

It was done so quickly and deftly that the Jew was taken completely by surprise. He was a prisoner, and helpless, before he dreamed of such a thing, or even of danger from that direction.

His face took on a sickly, yellow tinge; and his hands trembled so violently that he let the tray fall to the counter with a crash that made its contents jingle.

"Ach, mine gootness!" he fairly shrieked, looking helplessly at the medicine man. "Vhy you do dose tings, eh? You make a shoke of me, eh?"

"Ruther a serious joke, ain't it?" and Singer Sam could not help laughing lightly at the Jew's lugubriousness.

"Don't blay those shokes on me, please!" the Jew pleaded, trying to squeeze out a tear. "Mine brudder diet of heart disease in Ny Yorruck, and I vhas in t'e same fix! Take those t'ings off, if you please!"

Singer Sam was looking closely at the trembling wretch; and at this moment he observed a strange shadow pass over the Jew's face.

He was about to turn to learn the cause, when he heard a footfall behind him, and then the voice of Tobe Tinchman.

It was very low and very earnest:

"If you move, you're a dead man!"

Notwithstanding this stern injunction, Singer Sam wheeled as if on a pivot and faced the cracksman. Tinchman was threatening him with a big revolver, and there was an ugly look in his attitude.

"Take them things off'n Baumgard's wrists, or I'll send you to Kingdom Come in jist about a second. I know who you air, even if you hadn't done that; an' I won't stan' no foolin'!"

Singer Sam leaped at him, disregarding the uplifted weapon. It was discharged at almost the same moment, though the detective's quick movements saved him from the effect of the shot.

He struck Tinchman as he leaped forward and the bullet crashed harmlessly into the ceiling.

Stooping down to avoid another shot, Singer Sam blew shrilly on his policeman's whistle. Then he dodged again, not knowing but that Tinchman might send another bullet at him.

There was instantly a patter of racing feet in response to the vibrating call of the whistle.

A number of police had been stationed about the building before the detective entered it, with the understanding that such a call meant danger to him and that they were to come to his aid without a moment's delay.

The cracksman did not fire again. He heard that ominous racing of feet, and concluded that the best thing he could do was to look after his own safety.

As he scrambled up, after receiving that blow from the detective's fist, he jumped for the lamp, and in a twinkling had turned it out and plunged the room into darkness.

Singer Sam had placed such a cordon of police around the building that he did not deem it possible for Tinchman and the Jew to get away.

He could not tell which way the fugitives had flown, though he was sure they had not made a dash for the front entrance.

Through this the officers were already swarming; and to have taken that route would have meant capture for the criminals.

The detective knew the position of the lamp, and he reached this and had it lighted before any of the police could produce their lanterns.

The flood of light thus thrown upon the room revealed nothing of the whereabouts of the proprietor and his friend. The tray was on the counter, just where Baumgard had dropped it; and there was the ragged hole rent in the ceiling by Tinchman's pistol-ball.

These were the only things, except the presence of the detective, to testify to what had so recently occurred.

"They're gone!" said Singer Sam, looking around somewhat blankly. "But I'm sure they can't get out of the house."

It was not often that his purposes were thus frustrated. But in this instance he was compelled to acknowledge a temporary defeat.

Without instructions, the police took up the search, swarming over the premises like a lot of cats hunting for possible mice. Into every nook and cranny they poked; the detective leading them and urging them to thoroughness.

The Jew and Tinchman had disappeared completely.

There were buildings near, but it did not seem possible for them to have escaped from the pawn-shop into any of these. This theory seemed to be precluded by the statements of those of the police force who had remained on the outside for the sole purpose of preventing such a thing.

"I'm beat!" and Singer Sam sat himself down in a chair near the center of the pawn-shop and glanced disconsolately at his assistants. "I don't

reckon those fellows could be hidden in the walls or under the floor?"

An examination of the walls and floor were accordingly made; but, like their previous searches, it yielded no information.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SEEKING SHELTER.

WHAT had become of Tinchman and the Jew?

At the moment such strenuous efforts were being put forth to find them, they were safely ensconced on the roof of a building only a few yards from the pawn-shop. They could hear a great deal of what was going on, and could even see some of the movements of their enemies.

As soon as Tinchman turned out the light, he sprang for a rear stairway, which led from the lower part of the pawn-shop to the story above. He was accompanied in this flight by the terrified Jew.

The perilous nature of the business carried on by Baumgard made it almost certain that such raids would occur, and previous preparations had been made to lessen their perils.

A window opened from this upper room almost opposite the flat roof of an adjoining building. The space between was partly filled in by the bushy top of a shade tree. Baumgard had a ladder, light and strong, constructed of sufficient length to reach from this upper window to the roof. It could not have borne any considerable weight, but for the fact that he had nicely calculated to have the middle of the ladder rest on and be supported by one of the tree-branches.

The window-sash was cautiously raised, and together they looked breathlessly to the ground. They could not see the officers stationed there because of the gloom, but they could hear the movements of those who were rushing into the building by way of the front entrance.

Baumgard still wore the detested handcuffs, there being no present means to relieve him of them.

The ladder was lying near, ready for instant use. Tinchman lifted it out, pushed it carefully through the window, and succeeded in planting an end of it on the tree-bough.

The overcast condition of the sky greatly aided them, for it kept the police from seeing what was happening above.

Tinchman was strong of muscle, and it was not a difficult matter for him to push the light ladder out to the branch. Then he slowly and insidiously worked it across until the end rested on the edge of the opposite roof.

When this had been accomplished, they looked down again to ascertain if they had yet been discovered. They had not much time for delay, for they could hear the baffled men tramping about in the pawn-shop, and knew that the ascent of the stairway would be but the matter of a few moments.

The Jew crawled out first upon the ladder, and crept like a cat across to the roof; what slight sounds he made being drowned by the uproar below.

Tinchman followed, with even more care.

When he was across, he drew the ladder quietly toward him, sliding it back upon the roof with all caution.

They had it safely stowed away behind a big chimney, and were themselves crouching behind this chimney, when some of the police ran up the stairway to the window. This had been lowered by the fugitives. It was now hoisted; and the police looked out on the blackness of apparently empty space.

Tinchman and the Jew hugged the roof as if they were glued to it, while these guardians of the night stood at the window and discussed in low whispers the flight.

Nothing came of the survey of the police; and, in a short time, the window was lowered, and they disappeared.

"Now, we'd better scoot!" Tinchman averred, in one of his most suggestive whispers. "Some o' them chaps might take a fool notion to come a-pokin' round up hyer. Better slide while we kin, says I!"

He did not wait to see if the Jew coincided in this view, but slipped away along the roof. He had had ample experience in making similar flights, and the ease with which he glided over the smooth, flat surface would have done credit to an eel.

The Jew was not such an adept in this method of locomotion, but he imitated Tinchman's example to the best of his ability; all the while grumbling and mumbling in low tones about his hard lot.

From this roof they crossed to another, which was joined on to it; and from this to still another.

There was a fire-escape at this point, which Tinchman purposed to descend; but before saying this he halted to take a survey of the street below. It was a by-street, not illuminated by the electric glare, a thing on which he had counted to aid him.

Only occasionally did any one have reason for passing up or down this street; but just at that time, to the cracksman's infinite disgust, there

were two men standing only a few feet from the foot of the fire-escape, engaged in conversation.

Peering down from the high roof, he cursed this ill luck, with a bitterness that seemed to be intensified by the fact that he could not give it louder utterance.

"Ach! Ach!" groaned the Jew, locking his handcuffed wrists about his knees and swaying his body disconsolately backward and forward. "Dhis ish awvull! If dhose mans gatches us, it vill pe t'e insite of a chail ve vill see!"

"Oh, shut up!" Tinchman growled, giving the swaying body a gentle dig with one of his heels. "Baum, you make me tired. You hain't in any more danger than I am. So, shut up! We'll get out o' this all right, yit!"

This was not uttered in a tone loud enough to be heard a dozen feet, forcible as it was.

"But dhose estaplishments!" the Jew whined. "I am a ruint mans. All dhose t'ings vill be goppied by dhose bolice!"

"Lucky they didn't gobble you! Think of that, will you, and stop your whining. They got the irons on you, but they hain't got you. An' I hain't a figurin' that they will!"

He was thinking, at the same time of whether or not it would be safe to make a dash down the fire escape, if the police should follow and come upon them from the rear. They could do that, or make a race of it over the roofs. He decided in favor of the fire-escape, and again looked down at the two men.

These were shaking hands, as if they meant to separate. Enough light came into the narrow street from the glare of the electrics on the broader thoroughfares to show this.

In another minute the men had disappeared, going in opposite directions; and Tinchman whispered to the Jew that the time for decisive action had again arrived.

He then swung himself over the edge of the roof and began the descent.

Baumgard shivered as if struck with a chill, as he looked down into the dizzy depths. He felt a sick, reeling sensation; and clutched at the rim to keep himself from falling.

"Ach! Mine Gott!" he gasped, clinging with desperate energy, and looking across the roof to drive away that dangerous, giddy feeling. "Dhis ish awvull!"

Nevertheless, it seemed he must go forward. There was no other way by which he might more conveniently get down, without a return to the pawn-shop; and that he could not think of doing.

His whole frame shook, as he slipped down to the fire-escape; and only by the most desperate effort was he able to retain his grasp.

He descended, however, very slowly, his courage reviving as he came nearer and nearer to the ground.

Tinchman was waiting for him, with every manifestation of impatience.

"If there had been a fire in that house, you'd 'a' been a goner!" he growled into the Jew's ear, as the latter reached his side. "Snails hain't anywhere to you, the way you git along. It's a good thing them police hain't hot on our heels. If they had 'a' been, I'd 'a' slid out, an' jist let 'em gobble you!"

While waiting for the Jew to reach the ground, he had been narrowly watching the point where the little street opened into the larger one; and had his mind firmly made up to make a run for it, and abandon his companion should a policeman show threateningly near.

From the little street they darted into an alley, keeping all the while in the blackest shadows. In this way they hurried on, until they gained the rear of Madame Muriel's establishment.

Tinchman was a very dog, and made a careful survey of the surroundings before approaching the door. He did not know but what the police had stationed a cordon about this house, as they had about the pawn-shop. It was his belief that if no police were there now, it would not be long until their coming.

He saw nothing, however, to alarm him; and surreptitiously drew near the door. On its panels he gave a peculiar rap; and in a short time both he and the Jew were admitted.

The madame understood the significance of that rap, and had hastened down to let them in. She looked at them nervously, as they stood for a moment in the hallway.

"No time to talk, now!" Tinchman ejaculated. "The police are hot after us. See them bracelets Baum's a-wearin'? We had a narrer squeeze for it."

He had already turned toward the stairway, up which he now hurried, closely followed by the madame and the Jew.

It took but a few moments, after they had reached her rooms, to make the madame understand just what had happened.

She was pale, and trembling almost as violently as was Baumgard.

"You did jist right to come here!" she asserted. "I have no doubt those hounds will be howling around the house in a little while; but I can stow you where they'll never find you, smart as they may think themselves!"

She glanced at the Jew's manacles.

"You'll have to stand them awhile, Baumgard. We can't take them off, now!"

Then she drew some curtains aside, and led the way to the place where she intended to secrete them.

Singer Sam had not succeeded in arresting the pawnbroker; but he had accomplished his chief desire. He had given the madame and the major something to temporarily distract their thoughts from an immediate flight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OUTWITTED.

"I THINK matters air comin' to a focus!"

Tom Henderson, seated comfortably in a big chair by the stove in Madame Muriel's kitchen, looked up earnestly at Laura Dutton, as he said this.

Metaphorically speaking, Henderson had been making hay while the sun shone. There could be no doubt that he had advanced himself considerably in the estimation of this young woman. Even he, bashful and timid as he was inclined to be, felt it; and was greatly encouraged thereby. He believed that Laura Dutton was beginning to look on him kindly—more than kindly—and this belief brought satisfaction and contentment.

"I've been talkin' with Singer Sam about it," again referring to the same subject, "and that's the way I size it up from what he said. The madame and the major won't be able to fly high very much longer!"

There was in the tones a hope that this might be true. He had no cause to love the madame and the major, especially since he and Cecil had suffered arrest.

Their trial had been fixed for a number of days in advance, and they were out now on bail, Roscommon having become their bondman. He had little fear that they would experience much difficulty in securing their final release; but the fact that they had been accused of such a deed by a man of Langston's standing, cut Henderson to the quick.

Miss Dutton was doing up the evening's work, and she made the dishes clatter, as she replied:

"I hope it's so; and I have been thinking the same thing."

"Great minds run in the same channel!" grinning and nodding his head approvingly.

"Small minds, too, for that matter! But they can't fall any too quick for me. They have been flying high, as you put it, for a long time!"

"An' when they do, what do you expect to turn your hands to?" insinuatingly.

Laura colored, but managed to conceal the fact remarkably well.

"Oh, me? I can find some place, without much trouble. If nothing better offers, I can return to Mrs. Blair's."

"You wouldn't like to set up housekeeping for yourself, now, I reckon? For yourself and another—say two others?"

The color in Laura's cheeks deepened.

"There you're beginning your nonsense again!"

"'Twouldn't be a very big family!" Tom continued, hiding his heated face behind the stove, from which position he peeped out at her. "Not as big a family as you've got to do for here. You an' me, and Cecil. I'm the only hefty eater of the lot. Cecil don't eat enough to keep a cat alive. 'Twouldn't require much cookin', an' not much work!"

"You mustn't bother me, Tom, with such foolish questions—when you see I'm busy!"

"Another time, eh?" thrusting his knees up against his chin, and smiling in a very knowing way. "That's all right, Laura! I'm not in a hurry! Any time'll suit me—so it hain't forever. I hain't got any too much of this world's goods set by fer sich an event, anyway. Yes; next week'll do!—er next month!"

Laura trembled slightly as she put away the dishes; and skillfully diverted the current of talk. She liked Tom Henderson, better than any other man she had ever known; but she had a feeling that he was a little premature, and that it would be well to hold him somewhat in check. If he ever became her husband—and she had not settled as to that—the lesson taught him would be salutary.

Henderson fell readily into the new train of thought; and, thus conversing with Miss Dutton, passed one of the pleasantest hours of his life. Such fascination had that kitchen for him that he could scarcely drag himself away, when the time came for his departure.

He had not been gone a half-hour, when Laura was startled by Tobe Tinchman's peculiar knock. Something told her that there was a meaning to this; and she held the door slightly ajar and peered out at the madame, when the latter came down to admit the cracksman and the Jew. She heard what Tinchman said; and it threw her into a flutter.

In his talk concerning the madame and the major, Henderson had mentioned the fact that Singer Sam was preparing for some kind of a raid against the conductor of the pawn-shop. She understood now that he had failed in his plans, and that these men were fleeing from him.

She drew back with great circumspectness, scarcely moving until the madame and her visitors had disappeared. Then she threw a shawl

about her head and hurried quietly into the street.

She had no very well defined ideas as to what she ought to do, but she was determined that Singer Sam should know of the whereabouts of the fugitives. She thought it might be possible to hire a boy to carry the information to Henderson, who could communicate it to the detective.

Instead of a boy, the first person she saw was Jim Bass. She almost stumbled against him, as she hastened around a corner.

"Well, dad-gast me! I'd as soon thought of seein' my step-mother's ghost!"

The cowboy was on his way to Madame Muriel's kitchen for a talk with Laura. His duties had kept him away from the town for some days, and now, having returned, this was his first objective point.

She motioned him into the shadow of the building, and in breathless sentences acquainted him with her discovery.

"Well, dad-gast me!" drawing in his breath with a snort of surprise. "If you say the word I'll go up there and arrest both of them. 'Twould do me good to massacre the hull outfit! Any of 'em been abusin' of you lately?"

"I don't want you to slaughter them just yet!" laughing at Bass's pomposity. "The time hasn't come for that. After a while, you can turn loose on them!"

"Glad fer the priverlige!" with an ostentatious bow.

"Just now I want you to carry a message to Tom Henderson. He is at home, and I want you to go there and tell him what I have told you!"

The cowboy drew himself up frigidly.

"I'll be hanged if I do! I'm afeared if I went near that feller, I'd be tempted to shoot him. Say, he's been a-shinin' around you, hain't he? That's the fust thing I heerd when I struck the town. Now, I hain't a-goin' to 'low any o' that! I'm your lawful guarddeen, an' don't you fer-git it!"

The laugh with which she greeted this was not pleasant to the cowboy's ears.

"Think I'm a-funnin', do you? There's where you're away off. So help me, if I don't shoot that Tom Henderson on sight, if he don't leave you alone! You hear me!"

"He is working here at the house," she explained. "Of course I can't help speaking to him, can I? You wouldn't want me to go around with my lips glued together, would you?"

"Now take this message, and make haste. The madame may come into the kitchen and find me gone, and then there will be trouble. Tell Henderson just what I have told you; and have him carry the information at once to Singer Sam!"

Jim Bass felt that he could not refuse to obey; but he was grumbling deeply when he turned on up the street.

He delivered his message, emphasizing and punctuating it with a series of growling comments. He had modified his tones, however, and made no direct threats, though his words were full of hints and innuendoes.

Henderson realized the necessity of haste, and darted away at the top of his speed in search of the detective. He found him at the pawn-shop, from whose front entrance he had just come, the unsuccessful search having been abandoned.

The detective's whistle smote the air as soon as Henderson had explained the nature of his errand; and the baffled policemen were in a few moments congregated again about the detective.

An advance on Madame Muriel's establishment was instantly commenced. On arriving there, the men were stationed at various points to watch the building, and Singer Sam, with some others, boldly approached the front door.

A vigorous rapping of a policeman's club brought down the madame.

"Some men were seen to enter this place," said Singer Sam, facing her firmly. "They were Tobe Tinchman, and Baumgard, the Jew pawnbroker. We have come for them."

The madame was an adept in the arts of diplomacy.

"They were here," she confessed, glancing at the officers in her sweetest fashion. "But they are not here now. They only remained a few minutes. If you had come ten minutes ago, you could have found them without trouble. They are charged with something, I presume? I'm sorry that you came so late!"

"They are in this house," the detective declared. "We know that! They were seen to enter it, and we have positive information that they did not come out."

"Your information is incorrect, then. I'm perfectly willing that you should search the house. You will find it just as I say. The men are not here."

On the face of it, nothing could be fairer; though, as they ascended the stairway, Singer Sam had an uncomfortable feeling that, while the birds had not flown, they had been safely hidden.

He remembered his own experience. He had thought of it frequently, and tried to determine how he had been removed from there when drugged and clubbed. The most plausible theory seemed to be that there was an elevator by which he was let down into the cellar or some under-

ground apartment, from which point he had been spirited to the mining-shaft.

He meant now to look for this elevator, and for the underground room.

The madame was all smiles and condescension; and when the officers were grouped in her den, she assured them that the house and all in it was at their disposal.

"Search where you please, just so you don't soil my carpet!" and she indicated the rooms that were visible.

The officers immediately entered on their task, scattering over the building for the purpose of making the work as thorough as possible.

Singer Sam gave his time to a hunt for the elevator. He remembered the direction in which he had been dragged, or thought he remembered it. But look as he might, he could find neither the elevator nor the room to which he believed he had been taken. The multiplicity of hangings did not confuse him. He saw what rooms there were to be seen, but there was no elevator in any of them.

Somewhat bewildered by this failure, he descended to the kitchen and sought for the underground apartment. It was there; a cellar-like place, which opened on the street by way of a coal-hole, and also opened into the rear yard. But there was nothing suspicious about this basement. Certainly, the men they were seeking were not in it.

The policemen had no better luck. They looked the house over, but could find no traces of the fugitives.

CHAPTER XXX.

PLAYING A BOLD GAME.

THE next morning Madame Muriel presented herself at the Jew's pawn-shop.

Since Baumgard's flight, an officer had been put in charge of the house, the front door of which was now closed.

"Are you in charge of this place?" the madame questioned, presenting herself before the officer.

He had been lounging in the back yard, and was thoughtfully smoking a stubby pipe, when thus accosted. Although he knew the madame, and was familiar with her reputation, he was not proof against the smile she gave him.

He scrambled confusedly to his feet, politely doffed his helmeted hat, and replied in the affirmative.

"I have come down to relieve you of your possessions," smiling again, and at the same time producing a piece of paper from her hand satchel. "If you'll be kind enough to look at that, you will see my authority."

The officer saw that she had given him a sale bill for all the goods in the house. It was duly signed by Israel Baumgard, and bore a date of nearly a month previous.

"There was an attempt made to arrest the pawnbroker last night," she said, "but I understand he got away. I think he was charged with some thieving. The officers foolishly got the notion into their heads that he might be hiding at my house, and they came there and made a search. He had been there only a short time before, with a companion, but both were gone when the police came."

"The fact that he is charged with thieving will not prejudice my rights, will it?"

The policeman was not a lawyer, and so could not settle this point for her.

"I don't think it will, though," looking thoughtfully at the paper. "If you bought these things that long ago, and there was no lien or mortgage on them at the time, it seems to me they are yours."

"Why, of course, they're mine! If you had purchased them, now, just as I did, wouldn't they be yours. Would the fact that Baumgard has a charge against him cut any figure in the matter?"

The sale bill was very minute and descriptive, enumerating nearly everything in the pawn-shop, and lumping such small articles as could not well be otherwise incorporated.

"You will at least let me look at my property?" witchingly, glancing toward the closed door.

The officer was still puzzling over the sale bill, not knowing how he ought to meet the woman's claim. He got up and opened the door, according to her wish, and showed her through the place.

"There is only one thing," he asserted, as they wandered about, examining the pawn-shop's contents. "I have heard it hinted that there are stolen goods in here. Your sale bill would not cover those. You'll see that, quite readily!"

"Oh, certainly. I have no desire to take anything that does not rightfully belong to me. If Baumgard has made over stolen goods to me in payment of the debt he owed me, I suppose the loss will be mine."

"But I feel sure most of these goods were not stolen!"

On that point the officer was not posted. All he knew was that some stolen goods were said to be in there.

"There will have to be some legal formalities complied with," the officer observed. "You

understand that I have no right to do anything. I have been placed in charge of these goods, without authority to do anything except to look after them, and see that they are not carried away. Until I have orders from my superiors, I could not turn them over to you."

It seemed to hurt the blue-coated gentleman to have to speak thus harshly to the elegantly dressed woman. He was inclined to be gallant to all of the sex, especially to the pretty ones, or those who made a show of wealth. The madame was neither handsome nor homely, but to judge from her attire one would have set her down as immensely wealthy.

He called to a brother officer across the street, and, after some conversation with him, and some hesitation, left him in charge of the place, doffed his hat again to the madame, and hurried away.

It had occurred to him that he might lose his official head by dallying with this sweet-voiced temptress. So he transferred her, for a time, to his brother officer, and went in search of Singer Sam.

He found that gentleman at Roscommon's office.

"I will go down with you," the detective declared, climbing from the office stool on which he had been perched, and accompanying the policeman.

The madame was not pleased to see him, as was plainly evident by the sudden chill which fell upon her and checked the flow of her spirits.

"If you'll tell us where the Jew is, perhaps we can do something for you," he said, after beckoning her aside where he could speak to her without being overheard.

"As if I knew where the greasy thing had gone to!" tossing her head disdainfully.

"I don't see how we can let you have the property on that bill of sale!" was his firm declaration. "There is no need for me to mince matters with you, Madame Muriel. In the first place, I don't think that sale bill has been written twenty-four hours. You have seen Baumgard since we were at your house last night. Either that, or the sale bill is a forgery!"

The madame's cheeks mantled with indignation.

"It won't do you any good to get angry, my dear madame. If you were served as you deserve, you would be behind prison walls now! Both you and the major!"

"Why don't you put us there, then?"

"You know very well why I don't. You know that I have enough evidence to cause your arrest and secure your conviction. You know that, and yet you will speak to me in this way!"

"Why don't I arrest you? To do so now would be to defeat the very purpose that brought me here. I'm after that Quindaro estate. I'm not caring about these petty burglaries. I am looking for bigger game. I expect to corner you yet in such a way that you will be willing to pay that twenty thousand, if it takes every cent you have. You can't get out of the town! If you try it, then you will be arrested!"

"What about these goods?" turning coldly from him, unwilling to hear more.

She had her own ideas on this subject of escape; and believed she could safely take the chances.

"There's only one way by which you can get them. The goods are worth quite a lot of money. Just how much, I don't know. You could get them through a replevin suit by establishing your right to them, or the officers could turn them over to you on their own responsibility. But you may be sure they can't afford to do that unless they are made absolutely safe. Is there any one in this town who will become your surety for so large an amount?"

"Yes, there is!" biting off the words very curtly.

The detective still wore his old disguise, and he now ran his fingers through his thin beard in the old, familiar way.

"Who, pray?" looking steadily at her.

"John Langston!"

Singer Sam started. Langston was the rich merchant who had so lately been robbed, and who had brought about the arrest of Henderson and Marsden for the crime.

The detective had heard hints against the merchant's character, but it was his first intimation that Langston had fallen a prey to the wiles of this woman.

"Very well! Get Langston to go your bond—the amount will be fixed by the proper parties—and you can have the goods."

He turned away, not desiring to speak further with her; and left her to continue her negotiations with the authorities.

"It almost flattened me out," said the detective, speaking to Roscommon, after his return to the office. "I hadn't thought of Langston. He's rich enough; and I suppose is fool enough to grant her her request."

"And that explains another thing: The chances are big that Tinchman—who I am satisfied led in the raid upon his house—has been there frequently, at the instance of the madame, and so had ample opportunity to learn where the old man kept his treasures."

"Let her have her way; and give her rope enough with which to hang herself! That's what she'll do by and by!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEED OF A FIEND.

THESE exciting events did not prevent Singer Sam from holding his nightly concerts as the medicine-vender. There was really no need that he should longer do this; but the habit had grown on him; and the enjoyment he was able to get out of it more than compensated for the trouble, and served to distract his mind from graver things and to lessen the tension under which he was working. It did him good to watch the delight with which his songs and jokes were greeted. The outbursts of applause over trifles were extremely amusing. It was so easy to please these out-door audiences. They came to laugh; and he laughed with them; enjoying it all quite as much as they did.

Cecil Marsden's tasks were not usually onerous; but on this night he was detained at the office beyond the customary hour.

Very frequently, in going home, if he was at all late, he went by the corner where Singer Sam was accustomed to take his nightly stand—a hall had not been rented, in accordance with the intention announced to the madame!—and from thence he would go home with the singer, or with Henderson, or Jim Bass,—though the latter was not always in town.

The torch was flaring in a stiff wind, and the medicine-vender was in the midst of one of his lectures, when Cecil arrived at the corner on this night.

Neither Henderson nor Bass was there; and he seated himself on a curbstone, and for a time listened to the medicine man's quaint talk and funny songs.

Then Bass came along; and, as the boy was tired, having had rather a hard day of it, he went on home in Bass's company.

When they reached the house, they went around to the rear door, for the key Cecil had would not fit the front lock. They crowded into the dark kitchen and Cecil lighted the lamp. And then Bass, being hungry—he was always hungry!—began to devour the cold remnants of the evening meal.

While the cowboy was thus engaged, Cecil lighted another lamp and went into one of the front rooms.

A cry of horror from his lips caused Bass to drop a piece of meat on the floor, and hurry, with his mouth filled with a generous slice of bread, into that room.

He saw Cecil standing in the middle of the room as if transfixed.

The youth could scarcely enunciate, but stood with one hand pointed toward the door and to some objects on the floor in front of it. He was pale and trembling, and the lamp seemed about to topple from his grasp.

Bass looked in the direction indicated, and drew back with his usual exclamation.

What they saw was enough to startle any one. Poised on a box was a gun, which was pointed directly at the door. The hammer was set and the gun was ready for firing. From the trigger there stretched a piece of wire which passed around one end of a box and over a pulley and was attached to the door-knob. In short, it was a spring-gun, so set and arranged as to discharge its contents whenever the door was opened.

Singer Sam and Henderson carried keys to the front door. The intention doubtless was to bring about the death of one or both of these men.

"Well, dad-gast me!" again finding his tongue, after a moment of mute astonishment. "The boss-thief that put that thing there ought to be held up in front of it and made to pull the trigger. I've seen meanness in my time, but that lays it over everything!"

Cecil had sunk down white, and so suffering from nervous shock that he was almost unable to speak.

Bass made a cautious advance on the gun, eying it as if he feared it might whirl upon him and contribute its contents to the other indigestible matter with which he had been crowding his stomach. But the gun remained in place, and he reached over and carefully lowered the hammer. Then he drew away the wire, removed the cap, and set the weapon in one corner.

"Dad-gast ye! Stay there tell yer owner comes for ye!"

"Which will not be in a hurry," said Cecil, rising and forcing himself to say something. "The owner of that gun will never come for it. Oh, Jim! Wouldn't it have been terrible?"

He did not finish the thought, but placed his hands to his face as if to shut out some horrible suggestion.

"'Twould have been tough!" was the cowboy's comment. "But they hain't no use in gittin' skeered, now. That load of shot is still in the gun's innards, and is likely to stay there for some time. Don't go fer ter gittin' skeered now! The time to git skeered, if you have to, is when the battle is a-ragin'!"

There was an intimation in this that he never got "skeered."

Cecil was so wrought upon by the discovery, and by the thoughts of what might have occurred, that he could not rest, but nervously paced the floor until the coming of Henderson and the medicine man.

The cowboy returned to the kitchen and to his belated supper, anxious to show that such small matters could not interfere with his appetite. He was still nibbling away when the footsteps of their friends were heard.

Cecil sprung up with a little cry, and looked at the gun standing in the corner, to reassure himself that it could not now possibly harm any one. Then the door was opened, and Henderson and the detective came in.

Jim Bass hustled forward, and with great volubility and many exclamatory phrases, told the story of their discovery. Cecil said nothing, but his eyes were filled with tears and he was almost weeping.

Both Henderson and the detective looked serious. It had been a dastardly attempt at murder, and only an accident had prevented it from being a success. If the first comer to the house had entered by the front door there seemed little doubt that he would have been slain.

Singer Sam took the gun from the corner and minutely looked it over. It was an ordinary, single-barreled, muzzle-loading shot-gun. There was nothing to distinguish it from any one of a hundred others of the same pattern. It had evidently seen some use, and was rusty, as if it had for a long time been neglected. These were its only peculiarities.

There was a screw on the ramrod, and with this the detective drew out the load. It consisted of swan-shot, backed by a heavy charge of powder. It was plain that if it had been discharged as planned, the load would have gone through the door as easily as if the latter were only so much paper.

"I have a theory," and the detective, holding the rusty weapon in his hands, looked thoughtfully at the friends gathered about him. "It may or may not be true, but I shall think I am right until I have proof to the contrary. This gun came from Baumgard's pawnshop; and it was arranged in front of the door by that black fiend, Jingo. I'll warrant it hasn't been out of the shop twelve hours. I wish I had made an inventory of what the shop contained when I was there to-day. Madame Muriel had all the things carted to her house; and"—squinting at the weapon—"this gun was among them!"

He remained in thoughtful silence for a few moments, then spoke again:

"There's one thing that puzzles me! There could be no certainty that I would be the first to return to the house—and we take it for granted, of course, that this gun was put there for me. Why should any man, even Jingo, run such a risk of shooting the wrong person?"

This was something no one seemed able to answer.

"Mebbe he meant that fer me!" said Bass, looking around at the little company as if hoping they might think the same. "Say, you don't any of you think he meant that for me?"

"If you had opened that door, you would have got it, whether it was meant for you or not!"

"If you say the word," and Bass swelled with indignation, "I'll go up there an' pulverize that nigger, yit! A-settin' a spring-gun fer me! Why, I never done a thing to the black scoundrel in my life!"

"If you can find him, you'll do better than I think," was the detective's dry comment. "It's something I have never been able to do. It seems impossible to find any one when they're hidden in that house!"

Tom Henderson got up and tapped the detective on the shoulder.

"I'd like to see you for a minute! You and Cecil, in the kitchen!"

Singer Sam wonderingly arose and followed him, Cecil doing the same. When they were within the kitchen, Henderson closed the door after them.

This was a movement not at all pleasing to Jim Bass.

"Well, dad-gast me!" he muttered. "Stabbed, as you may say, in the house o' my friends. Them fellers is a-goin' to talk about me! I reckon, now, they don't think I set up that infernal machine! They're a-goin' to talk about me, or else about the nigger. Both beautiful subjects! But if they think I hain't a-goin' ter hear what they say, they're left!"

He got up and tip-toed softly to the kitchen door, placing an ear against it to better enable him to hear.

To his disgust, he found that the three had drawn to the further side of the kitchen, and were conversing in low whispers. He could catch a word now and then, but only enough to bewilder him.

"Dad-gast the luck! Is that the way to treat a gentleman o' my standin'? If they accuse me of settin' the spring-gun, likely they'll accuse me o' tryin' to blow up the house that time, and say that I pitched that blazin'-powder down there myself."

But he was quickly made aware that they were not talking about him. A revelation seemed to be in progress—either that or something equally mysterious. Bass heard Jingo's

name mentioned once, and thought it must refer to the negro. But on this point he could not be at all sure. The scraps of sentences which he caught were so disconnected that he was not able to piece them together into a satisfactory whole.

"I could not have done better myself," he heard Singer Sam say. "It is really wonderful. I suppose you have proofs to substantiate all this? It is really wonderful! Wonderful!"

Bass understood Henderson to declare that these proofs, whatever they were, would be forthcoming at the proper time.

The talk lasted for some minutes longer, when there was a movement toward the door.

Bass slipped back to his chair, and was sitting in it very unconcernedly, and looking at the gun, when they came in.

"You will excuse us for having gone out there a few moments?" said the detective. "There was an important communication, of a very private character, which Henderson wished to make. There is a good deal of slyness and slipperiness in my profession, you know; and sometimes things have to be done that may seem a little rude!"

Bass seemed wholly absorbed in his examination of the weapon.

"I've jist been a-thinkin' that if you'll let me take this hyer thing, I'll go up to the madame's and shoot the nigger with it. It would be treatin' him jist right to lay him out with his own weepin'!"

He got up as if about to leave the house with the gun for this laudable purpose, but Singer Sam stopped him.

"Your revolver will do, Bass. I've an idea I may want that gun for another purpose. Probably as a piece of evidence. Use your revolver; and, when he's a cold corpus, send for me. I'd like to see him!"

Bass had no thought of seeking the negro, but he did want to see Laura Dutton; and accordingly, when he left Henderson's, he bent his steps toward Madame Muriel's.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"THE HONOR OF THIEVES!"

TOBE TINCHMAN and Israel Baumgard were seated in one of Madame Muriel's rooms. It was a room which Singer Sam and his police associates had looked all through, and therefore of course not the room where the scamps had been hidden at the time of the search.

Both of them were in an ill humor, and their talk was principally grumbling outbursts against their lot.

Tinchman was looking white and sick. He could not stand indoor life, having been so long accustomed to active exertions.

His hand, too, which had received the vitriol, was paining him. He had hurt it in climbing from the roof during his flight from the pawnshop.

Baumgard was all right, physically, but far from it otherwise.

He was fearful of final discovery, and the financial losses he would be forced to sustain weighed heavily on him.

"There hain't no use in talkin'!" Tinchman growled, apparently addressing the carpet which he was scuffling up with his feet. "I hain't a-goin' to stay hyer no longer than I have to. Baum, what's the reason we can't dig out to-night? What's to hinder? The madame says no; but the madame hain't a-bossin' us!—not by a jugful!"

"Bud mine peesness!" the Jew wailed. "Mine property! What vill become of it?"

"The madame will take keer of it fer ye! She's got it now, hain't she?"

"Dhot vomans?" throwing up his hands. "I vhas a vhoor vhor efer truding her vith dhot sale pill! She vhill pe t'e ruin of me!"

"That's what I told ye at the time?" resolved not to become a comforter to this son of Jacob in his hour of affliction. "That's what I told ye! You remember I said to ye: 'Baum, if ye ever git them things back, er a fair vally fer them frum the madame, 'twill be a surprise to me!'"

The Jew nodded his head and wrung his hands.

"Bud what vhas I to do? I coult not holt t'e t'ings! I coult not go down dhere and haf dhose bolice gif dhem ofer to me! What coult I do else? Dell me dhot, vill you?"

Tinchman was working toward an object yet unrevealed.

"I say, let's git out o' hyer! The longer we stay, the wuss we will be off. I'm sick a'ready! I'll be as white and thin as a ghost if I stay in this hole much longer. The air is so close that it jist nacherally kills me to breathe it. I'm in favor of makin' a break!"

"And leaf all of dhose t'ings!" again uplifting his hands. "I would not haf so much as a peggar!"

"Baum, you're lackin' in good, hard sense!" staring at him as he delivered this compliment. "I don't see how you ever managed to carry on a bizness like that. I hain't no notion—"

Here he dropped his voice and looked carefully around to make sure no one was near to hear him.

"—Of goin' away from hyer like a bankrupt!"

completing the sentence. "Not if I know myself, I hain't."

The Jew stared at him, not at once catching the drift of the thought.

"Them things air hyer in the house, hain't they? An' we know where they air!"

Baumgard began to understand.

"Bud ve coult nod dake dhem vith us!"

"Not all of them, of course! There was a good many things in your shop, Baum, that I wouldn't carry across the street, if you was to give 'em to me. But there's a good many other things there that air diff'rent. What's to keep us from takin' them?"

"An' then there's the madame's diamonds! She's got 'em—genuine sparklers—an' I've seen 'em, an' know where they air!"

The Jew regarded him admiringly.

"I hain't been a-nosin' around hyer, my dear uncle, with my eyes shet, like you have. You bet, I hain't! I know where them sparklers air, an' I know where the rest of her jewelry is. I kin lay my hands on the hull of 'em in five minutes. You don't want to lose nothin', an' yit we both want to git away. I'm free to say that I'm on the make. The madame'll do you up in that little deal, as sure as you're a sheeny! Why not git ahead of her? Run a cold deck into the game, as ye may say?"

The Jew was every whit as unscrupulous as his companion. Both were thieves, with all the instincts of thieves. So strong was the development of their propensities in this line that they would not hesitate to rob their nearest and dearest friends, if they could do so safely. The madame had aided them, and was now sheltering them; yet they were purposing to turn and rend her.

"It strikes me vavorably!" the Jew declared, pursing up his lips and pulling thoughtfully at his big beak of a nose. "In t'e evend dhot we can do as you say, it vill bay me vor all mine troubles and losses. Id is a gread sgheme!"

"A way-up scheme!" the cracksman asserted; pleased to know that the Jew was likely to be a willing assistant. "Baumgard, it'll make both of us rich! Why, them sparklers air worth a half-dozen pawn-shops, to say nothin' of the other things we kin take. We kin go out of this town with more solid wealth than either of us ever had in our lives!"

The Jew's eyes shone greedily.

"Of course, there's to be a fair divvy of the swag!" Tinchman put in, with his usual caution. "After we divide even, you'll then have more, three times over, than you could ever have made out o' yer bizness!"

"Of goursel!" said the Jew, thinking of the rich haul in store for them. "How many vhas dhey of dhose tiamonts?"

"Ear-rings and pin! But they air good ones. I'm afearod to say jist how much I think they'd bring, if the sale was worked right. They could be taken out of the settin's and sold as single stones. Likely that'd be the best way. I've no doubt that brother of yours in Ny Yorrak could do the thing up brown!"

He was talking for the purpose of increasing the Jew's cupidity, as he felt that Baumgard would not make a bad ally in the attempt he had in mind. He had other and secret thoughts, which he carefully kept from his companion. He would secure Baumgard's aid in getting out of the place, and when once they were safe he meant to ruthlessly rob him of his share of the spoils.

"When vill ve do dhis?" looking to the cracksman for guidance.

"This very night! It's about ten o'clock now, and we won't want to move until after midnight. We'll wait till everything is quiet!"

Baumgard leaned lazily back, wrapped in dreams of the wealth that might yet be in store for him; while Tinchman kept covert watch on him, giving his mind up to a further development of his plans.

None of the other inmates of the house came near them that evening, and they devoted much of the time to a discussion of the contemplated robbery. But even then the hours dragged.

Tinchman became so restless he could scarcely longer endure the confinement and the delay. He walked uneasily up and down the room, muttering to himself, and cursing the luck that held him there.

The expected hour came at last, and the cracksman made a circuit of the building, to assure himself that all within the house was quiet. He did not know whether the madame or the major were at home or not. There had been a light in the kitchen earlier in the evening, but he regarded that as a fact of no consequence.

He had removed his shoes, and before returning to the Jew, he secured the diamonds and the other articles he had intended to take. He almost staggered under the load. There were valuables of every description, among them a number of costly gold watches.

The bag containing these he handed to Baumgard, and bearing the remainder of the burden, proceeded lightly down the stairway toward the door by which they meant to make their exit from the house. It was one of the rear doors, and opened on a diminutive garden-plot.

Tinchman opened this door and stepped softly out into the night. So far everything had gone

well. But now he drew back, pulled the door to after him, and stood undecided at the side of the Jew.

"Cuss the luck!"

"My tear frient, what is t'e madder?" shivering with ill-defined fear.

"If I hain't mistaken, there's a cop a-standin' right by that fence!"

The Jew pulled the door slightly ajar and glanced out.

Sure enough, a man was leaning lazily against the low picket fence, seeming to be abstractedly watching the flickering of a street-lamp a square or more away. He was dressed in ordinary citizen's clothing, and there seemed nothing suspicious in his make-up. He was smoking, as was shown by the red cigar-end which was occasionally revealed.

"Coult you nod pe misdaken?" withdrawing his head and addressing Tinchman. "Dhot does nod look like a bolice-man!"

"That shows how much sense you've got!" growlingly. "I've seen too many of the gentry not to know 'em. I hain't afraid o' one man, p'ticularly; but where there's one, there's liable to be more. They hunt in packs, like wolves!"

He was silent for a time, as if reflecting on what course to pursue. Then he put his bundle on the floor, removed his shoes—which he had only had on for a few seconds—and crept into the yard.

He remained out long enough to satisfy himself that the building was closely encompassed by police spies, all of whom wore citizen's clothing, and seemed to be doing nothing in particular but stand about and converse with each other, or smoke their cigars in solitude.

"I wasn't shore whether the madame was in the house or not," he muttered, as he slipped back toward the door where he had left Baumgard. "But I'll bet she is! Two to one, them gentlemen are after her and the major as much as they're after me and the Israelite!"

Baumgard had not moved from his position during the cracksman's absence.

"It's no go!" Tinchman whispered. "The house is surrounded, and if we try to git out now we're sure to be nabbed!"

The Jew looked disconsolately at the packages heaped at his feet.

"What will we do with them? We could carry 'em back to where they belong, but I hain't a-goin' to. The shadders made by this house air purty heavy, an' there's a tree which makes the yard darker. I'll tell you what, we'll bury the hull bilin' of 'em under that tree; an' then we'll go back an' play innocent an' keep mum until we have a better chance to give the police the slip."

This seemed to both the wisest thing to do, and they at once set about it. The packages were borne to a place beneath the tree, and buried in a hole which the two men scraped out with their knives.

They worked very slowly and very cautiously, and almost an hour was consumed in this task. Tinchman was not satisfied with the work until bits of grass and fallen leaves had been scattered over the spot to give it a natural look.

As they were returning to the rooms above, and when near the one they had occupied, they were startled by the tread of light feet. The sounds were so indistinct they might not have heard them had not their ears been unnaturally strained. They crouched down, and waited to ascertain the cause of these stealthy movements. To their great surprise, they saw Laura Dutton stealing carefully from point to point.

They could not understand the reason of this, not knowing what commands had been laid on Laura by the detective. The girl was really engaged in trying to ferret out some of the mysteries connected with the house.

As she passed not far from them, they saw a handkerchief drop from her person and fall to the floor unnoticed by her. She continued on leaving it lying there.

Tinchman pinched the Jew's arm.

"D'ye see that?" ecstatically. "The madame'll find that thing, and she'll think it was the gal that done the stealin'. That'll throw her off our track; and the fu'st chance we git, we kin go down and dig up the swag and slide!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FROM LOVE TO TEARS.

POOR Laura Dutton was all unconscious of the tell-tale handkerchief she had left behind. She had no right in that part of the house, as she well knew. It was, to her, forbidden ground. But she had promised Singer Sam to do what she could to lay bare the secret of the various things that had puzzled him, and this she was trying to do. He had said that there was a room there which he could not find. She was trying to locate it.

Her mission was unsuccessful. Whatever the mysteries of the house were, they were guarded well. She had been frightened from the attempt by what seemed a low whispering. She believed the sounds due to her imagination, though they were made by Tinchman and the Jew; and returned to the kitchen, and to her bedroom, which adjoined it.

This prowling search through the house served one object at least. It gave her a new subject of thought to present to Tom Henderson, when he came in the morning.

Tom, likewise, had something to discuss: The discovery of the spring-gun.

Henderson was undisturbed by the police in his coming and going. They had certain instructions. They were to watch the house, and permit no one to leave it or enter it without observation. If the madame or the major should merge—and this order applied equally to Tobe Tinchman, the Jew, and the negro—they were to be followed; and, if they sought to leave the town, were to be placed under arrest.

These instructions, conjoined to the finding of the spring-gun, were what sorely puzzled Singer Sam. He had stated that he believed the placing of the gun to have been the work of the negro. How the negro got out of the house without being seen and followed, was what he could not understand.

This, however, is not to the present purpose, and will be explained in due course of time.

Madame Muriel, not in the best of spirits, and suffering from a blinding headache, the result of her recent excitements, came languidly forward through the upper rooms in the early hours of the morning, and stopped short when she beheld the handkerchief.

A swift change came over her face. She recognized that delicate piece of linen, and its presence there was intensely suggestive. She picked it up and scrutinized it. The initials, L. D. were worked in a monogram in one of the corners.

"The deceitful thing!" her eyes flashing. "She was up here last night. I told the major he was a fool for wanting her to return. I felt sure all the time she had been spying. She came up here no doubt to see if she could discover something that would be of benefit to the detective."

The madame was a shrewd guesser, and had hit the mark at the first trial.

She had opposed Dinsmore's wish to have Laura come back to the house. The major had believed it would be safest to have the girl beneath that roof. He had explained his reasons for thinking so, but they had not been satisfactory to the madame; and now the madame felt she had ample proof of the wisdom of her advice.

The madame did not at once proceed to the kitchen, deeming it best to think the matter over seriously before charging the girl with duplicity. The madame had so many things to think about in those days and nights that her head fairly swam because of its burden.

With footsteps that were unusually shaky, she went in search of the major. She found him standing in open-eyed astonishment before the unclosed case which had contained her jewels. He had been the first to discover their loss, having chanced that way and observed the case to be open.

He pointed dumfoundedly to the evidence of robbery.

The madame ran forward, her hands clasped, and an inarticulate cry on her lips.

"Who do you suppose can have done that?" was the major's hollow question. "I came by here, not dreaming that anything might be wrong, when I saw this lid open!"

The woman held up the handkerchief.

"And I found this near one of the other rooms just a little while ago! Can there be any connection between them?"

The major looked at the handkerchief amazedly.

"It is Laura's!"

"Of course! You don't need to tell me that! But is there any connection between this handkerchief and the robbery of the jewel case? Somebody took the jewels last night, and somebody dropped this handkerchief last night! Was it one and the same person?"

She was half-distracted by the unexpected loss. The jewels were extremely valuable. They were even too valuable to be frequently worn. They had not been purchased for that purpose, dearly as she loved display. It was a compact and convenient way to invest a large amount of money. If compelled to flight, the jewels could be taken, if all else had to be abandoned.

Just at that time, when they were making all preparations for a stealthy exit from the town, the blow fell with special severity.

The major knew not what further comment to make, but at a venture suggested Tinchman and the Jew.

The madame was almost too nervous to think connectedly.

"I don't doubt they would do it, even after all I have done for them. Yes, they would rob me while under the shelter of my roof!"

The madame, like many other people, was inclined to take to herself credit which was not really her due. She had not given Tinchman and the pawnbroker shelter because she highly regarded them, but because it was safest for herself to do so. They possessed many secrets relating to her and the major. Secrets which she could not afford to have known, and which might

become known should they be arrested. Hence, she had taken them in and concealed them.

"I'm sure I don't know what to do!" the major confessed, looking doubtfully from her to the empty case. "It hardly seems that the men would take them, and still remain in the house!"

"But are they still in the house?"

The major had hopes of being able to break through the line of policemen now guarding the house, and it might be that Tinchman and Baumgard had been able to do so.

He did not reply to the madame's question, but hastened away to ascertain if the men were still there.

He found them in their room, apparently sleeping soundly, as if they had not a thought to trouble them.

He returned to the madame with this information.

"Then it was Laura!" with a vicious clicking of the firm, white teeth. "I told you, major, we could not trust that girl; and you would have her returned! And now you see the result! How can we leave here without those jewels?"

It was a hard question. Dinsmore frowned, not liking the madame's tone of reproach.

"You can go to the girl, and if she is guilty, perhaps you can force a confession from her. We're bound to have those jewels!"

"And if she won't confess?"

"There's only one other thing! You can turn the pawn-shop material and the property over to Langston and force him to give you a lot of money!"

"But the police, major!"

For a moment a scared look sat on the major's face.

"Confound the police! I had almost forgotten them! We must have those jewels!"

Madame Muriel was so wrought up that she did not tarry long to discuss the subject, but hurried toward the kitchen, busy with plans for forcing a confession from Laura Dutton.

The sounds of voices caused her to halt at the top of the stairway. The panic of a sudden fright seized her, produced by those voices. Her first thought was that the police were in the kitchen; and she was about to fly back along the way she had come to warn Dinsmore and their confederates. But she caught her breath with a sigh of relief, when she knew that the voices were only those of Henderson and the girl.

She slipped softly down to the door, thinking she might overhear something of value. She hardly thought it likely that Laura would confess the theft to Henderson, but she argued that there was no telling. She knew that Henderson was recognized by the girl as a suitor, and her experience in the fortune-telling business told her that young and foolish girls frequently confided important secrets to the men they loved.

She crouched at the foot of the stairway and listened intently. Not satisfied with this, she half-rose, and applied an eye to the keyhole.

Henderson was sitting near the girl, holding one of her hands in his, and speaking on the subject that was constantly uppermost in the minds of these two. The girl was blushing as redly as any rose. The madame bit her lip in disappointment. She was not to hear what she hoped; but, nevertheless, she did not cease her spying.

"This hull bizness 'll be wound up in a day or two, an' I'll be glad of it," she heard Henderson say. "Not that I'm tired of bein' around here, a-seein' and a-talkin' to you, Laura! Not by any means! But mebbe you'll agree, then, to make my home yours; and I can see and talk with you a good deal more then than I can even now."

The conversation seemed about to end, for he arose to his feet. He still held the girl's hand, however, and now stooped above her.

"You will give me that promise, won't you?" he pleaded.

The madame could not hear the girl's low-spoken reply; but she saw Henderson stoop and kiss Laura, and then go slowly and reverently out of the house.

She waited until sure Henderson had departed for good, then opened the door and stepped very stiffly and dignifiedly into the kitchen. Laura had not her hand; her descend the stairway, and so gave a little start when the door opened and she beheld the madame.

The latter, watching eagle-eyed for some manifestation of guilt, caught at this very natural movement.

She said nothing, at first, but held up the handkerchief.

"Do you know where I found this?" in tones that were extremely icy.

Laura flushed painfully, as she saw the bit of linen. She had not missed it, but she knew now that she had dropped it somewhere in her wanderings through the forbidden rooms.

"I—I—" she stammered.

"Do you know where I found it?" sharply and incisively.

Laura did not reply. She was trembling violently, in spite of her efforts to remain calm, and the tears had sprung to her eyes.

"I will tell you where I found it, and then you must tell me where my jewels are!"

The girl's eyes opened in wide astonishment.

"Your jewels?" she gasped.

"Yes, my jewels! You took them last night. You cannot deny it. I can see guilt written in your face! And if I needed any added proof, here is your handkerchief. You dropped it while prowling about the rooms in search of the jewel case, or as you came away!"

"You are mistaken, Madame Muriel!" Laura asserted, very earnestly and very decidedly. "I never took your jewels!"

"It will do you no good to lie to me, Laura!" with an expression that was almost fiendish. "My diamonds were stolen last night, and I know you stole them!"

"Indeed, Madame Muriel, I did not!"

"Then explain about this handkerchief!" was the request, in the madame's firmest tones.

Laura could not explain, without incriminating herself. She felt she could not confess to the madame her purpose in visiting the upper rooms. There was only one other refuge, and that was to give way to her emotions in an outburst of tears, and this she did.

The madame looked at her sternly and relentlessly, believing her guilty of the theft of the jewels. She was about to shower her with reproaches, when there was an emphatic ring at the front door-bell. The madame paled, and withheld her denunciations.

Her thought was that this might mean the coming of the dreaded police; and thinking so, she hurried up-stairs to warn the men, before descending to admit the unwelcome visitor.

When she opened the door, she saw before her Cecil Marsden.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE WALL

JIM BASS was sauntering slowly up the street when Tom Henderson came from Madame Muriel's kitchen, that morning. Now, while Bass was a braggart and blusterer, he was also inclined to be jocular and jovial. He had claimed Laura Dutton as his sweetheart for so long that he really felt he had paramount rights there. But he also recognized the fact that in love affairs, the race is to the winner.

It is doubtful if Bass really cared for any one in a whole-hearted, unselfish way. He fancied Laura Dutton, and thought she would make a good wife. But the marriage, of which he had so frequently spoken, was viewed by him more in the light of a business transaction than of a purely love-affair.

He saw Henderson, as the latter made his way from the house; and, going up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, at the same time drawing himself up with the air so peculiar to him.

"I say, Henderson! Hain't you a-crowdin' matters rather fast over there?"

Bass could not be unmindful of the light that shone in Henderson's eyes, for Henderson's face was irradiated by the tender passion that had grown up in his heart. This was especially noticeable at that moment—for had he not been accepted by the sweetest and best woman in the world?

He flushed painfully under the cowboy's gaze. The question was so unexpected that he had no reply for it.

"I say, is it jist the fair thing?" looking at him with pretended sternness. "Hyer I've been a-wastin' vallyble sleepin' hours a-settin' up with that charmin' creeter, only to hand her over to you at the last minute! Is it a fair deal?"

"Answer me that, will ye?" tapping him again on the shoulder. "Is it a fair deal?"

Henderson forced a laugh.

"Everything's fair in love and war—"

"An' the detective bizness! Yes, I 'low it is! An' I'm glad you put it that way, fer I was jist on the p'int o' pullin' my gun on you an' puttin' a stop to your matrimonial intentions!"

"Singer Sam sent me down hyer to see you!" changing his manner. "He wants you up at the house, this minute. An', while you're gone, I'm a-goin' over to tackle that girl and make her explain why she prefers you to me. Why, dad-gast it, Henderson! I'm the best lookin' man of the twol! A heap the best lookin'!"

He drew himself up by Henderson's tall form for comparison.

"I'll leave it to any gal in the town! Any sensible gal! Not to Laura Dutton for she's lost what little sense she had. She must have, else she wouldn't pick you out in place of me. But I'm a-goin' in to see her, all the same!"

Henderson caught him by the arm and detained him. He did not want Bass to intrude on Laura at that moment, feeling that she would not care to see the cowboy just then.

"Come, go back to the house with me! You can call on her at any time, to-day, for you told me last night you were knockin' off work for a few days. If there's a conference to be held, perhaps you'll be wanted."

Bass's curiosity was still exercised over the mysterious talk held in the kitchen at Henderson's the previous evening. It occurred to him that he might gain some information if he returned to the house, that would assist in elucidating the puzzle. Therefore, he very willingly turned about and accompanied Henderson.

"I wonder what Cece was a-doin' at the madame's front door a while ago?" Bass asked, as he linked his arm into the miner's. "I see him walk up to it as if he meant to ring."

This was news to Henderson; and as they walked on, they fell to wondering what it might mean.

Singer Sam was awaiting them at the house. They found him singing somewhat mixedly and excitedly. On the table before him were spread some valuables.

"Do you see these?" he said, pointing them out to Henderson. "If you'll help me to explain them you will do me a favor."

Henderson stared at the trinkets, not exactly understanding the situation.

"I found them tucked in between some boards in the wall over there. You never had any occasion for concealing anything of the kind?"

"Never!" and Henderson bent low over the articles. "I never saw them before."

He looked at the wall to which the detective had pointed. The house was ceiled, and he now saw that one of the boards had been pried loose. It had fallen out of place.

Singer Sam got up and walked over to the board as he talked.

"It was just an accident that caused me to notice this. I saw that the board had been only lately misplaced. I could not remember that it had been loose before, and so I got up to examine it. I saw a piece of paper tucked in there, and that I drew out, for a feeling had come to me that here was something which needed investigation. You see, when it was pried off and the paper thrust in there, the board was shoved back into place; but in such a way that a close looking would show it had been tampered with. It was not refastened securely, and dropped out; and that's how I happened to see it."

He pushed the board to where it belonged, to illustrate his words.

"I never knew anything about that," Henderson averred, much mystified. "You found the things in the paper you took out of there?"

"That's where I found them," returning to the table whereon they lay. "They were done up snugly in the paper. It was a neat trick. I wanted to see you before coming to any conclusion. I did not think you knew anything about them, but of course there was a possibility."

Bass had sat himself down before the table, and was staring at the articles open-mouthedly, very much as if he fancied they might be good to eat. The detective had not acquainted him with the nature of the discovery before sending him for Henderson.

"Well, dad-gast me! That does beat all! They're a lot of parties, ain't they? If Henderson, hyer, hadn't stole my gal from me, I'd feel like buyin' the hull lot, an' takin' 'em to her fer a present. I would so! She'd shine up, a-wearin' all that truck, wouldn't she?"

The others paid scant heed to Bass's words, being engrossed in thoughts of the find.

"What do you make of it?" Henderson queried.

"Just this—since you don't know anything about them. Those things were taken from Langston's by Tinchman and the Jew, when they burglarized that gentleman's house. You know, we've concluded that they did the work, and did it for the purpose of getting you and Cecil into trouble. One of them, or some ally—perhaps Dinsmore or the negro—came down here when no one was at home and placed these things in there. They could do that as easily as they could get into the house and set up a spring gun. And they did it for the purpose of convicting you and Cecil of the burglary. They believed Langston would cause a search to be made of the house. Very probably, they felt able to induce him to do that. Probably, too, that task would have been delegated to Madame Muriel, because of her influence over Langston.

"If that had been done, and these things found here, you can see how hard the case would be likely to go against you!"

"Why wasn't it done?"

"Because I moved so quickly against the Jew. That move threw their plans into confusion. The trial will not come off for a week or more, and all of them will be at the end of their tether long before that. In my judgment, that's the only thing that kept them from pushing Langston on to make a search!"

He said this with the air of a man who is firmly convinced that he has hit upon the true solution of a very troublesome question.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Cecil Marsden's Peril.

THE madame was in no very amiable mood when she beheld Cecil Marsden. Her face showed tokens of the excitement she had recently undergone; and Cecil in voluntarily drew back.

"You want to see me?" she inquired, coaxing up a smile.

The sudden hope had come to her that Singer Sam or Roscommon meant to lower their demands, and that the outlook for her and the major might still be better than she had thought.

The boy reached into his pocket for a note he had brought from Roscommon.

"Come up stairs," urged the madame, glancing around to see if any of the police were watch-

ing her, or near enough to hear her words. For a wonder not one of those gentlemen appeared within the field of her vision.

Cecil reluctantly followed her up the stairway and into the room to which he had been conducted on a previous occasion.

The same creepy feeling came over him as he entered this room. There was in it a suggestion of evil, or danger, which he could not shake off. The madame seemed to him more like an ogress than a real woman, and he shrank as must the children of the fairy tales when they were about to be devoured by such monsters.

The madame, however, was all sweetness and smiles; and when she had shown him to a seat, she took the letter from his hands, and read it.

It contained nothing new or very startling. It was a final appeal from the young lawyer, urging her and the major to make restitution of the money obtained from the Quindaros. Even at that late stage of the game, he promised them that if they would do so, he would do what he could to aid them. He did not state that he thought they could get off without punishment, but agreed to use his influence to make this as light as possible.

It was the same offer which the detective had made in verbal form.

The madame smiled scornfully, as she ran her eyes down the written page. To make restitution, was a thing she and the major had no thought of doing. All their earthly possessions would scarcely have netted twenty thousand dollars; and to go out into the world beggared, was, to her, a horrible thought.

Besides, she was counting strongly on their ability to make their escape from the house, notwithstanding that it was under police surveillance.

She sat glancing at the letter abstractedly, but not seeing a word it contained; and a terrible rage swelled up in her heart as she thought of how she and the major were hounded and hedged in.

With a glance at the boy, as if she wished she might strike him dead at her feet, she crumpled the letter in her hand and quitted the room.

She returned shortly, having in the mean while peeped into the kitchen to ascertain if Laura Dutton was still there.

"You will tell Mr. Paul Roscommon," and she smiled as she had done on admitting the boy to the house, "that I have talked with the major, and we think very well of his offer. There are some preliminaries, though, which will take time to arrange. We want to make him a proposition, which, if he accepts, will enable us to restore this money of which he speaks in the letter. You have read the letter?"

Cecil replied that he had not.

"It does not matter. Mr. Roscommon will understand me. The letter mentions a sum of money which he wants me to pay over. This evening I can tell him definitely whether I can do it or not. You may assure him that I will, if I can. Tell him that I shall have to see Mr. Langston. Don't forget that, please. I shall have to see Mr. Langston; then, if you will come here late this evening, I will have an answer ready, which you can take to him."

She was benignant itself, as she delivered this message, and the smile did not leave her face until she had shown him down the stairway and out of the house.

The black look came back, though, as she turned toward the kitchen, thinking of Laura Dutton and the missing diamonds.

Her further interview with Laura was, to the latter, painful in the extreme. But the girl met the madame's charges with womanly firmness. She had had time to nerve herself, and to gather strength against the madame's attack. She resolutely denied all knowledge of the lost articles, and would not be browbeaten into confessing that she took them; and the madame was forced to retire discomfited from the field.

That afternoon the madame arrayed herself in her costliest robes, and paid a visit to John Langston. The result of that visit was not wholly satisfactory.

Langston was willing to do something to aid her, but not to the extent demanded.

Therefore, on her return to the house—she was followed by police spies to and from Langston's—she had a long conference with Dinsmore, at which it was agreed they should endeavor to make their escape that night.

The fact that the madame had found it easy to come and go encouraged them. They knew they were watched; but, if permitted to leave the house, they hoped that somewhere in the town they might be able to throw the spies off the track and succeed in getting away.

The shadows of night were at hand, when Cecil Marsden returned to the madame's for the answer she had promised him.

There had been other conferences besides the one engaged in by the madame and the major. The most important of these was one held in Roscommon's office, at which there were only present Singer Sam, Cecil and the young lawyer. The detective did not believe the madame would do anything, arguing that she was only

temporizing for purposes of delay. Roscommon hoped for better things; but it was decided that if the madame and the major did not come to terms that night—and within a few hours—the arrest should be made.

Understanding all this, Cecil came back to Madame Muriel's, and rung at the door.

The woman came down to admit him as she had done in the morning. She was also as radiant and smiling. The boy could not know that her heart was boiling over with suppressed rage against him. He could not know that the designs of a fiend were working in the mind masked behind that cordial smile. If he had known, he would have fled from the place and from her presence as from the presence of a pestilence.

He ascended the stairway as unconscious of the peril that menaced him as if he were only an innocent fly creeping into the meshes of a spider's web.

The intentions of the madame and the major concerning him were deadly. They had reasons for disliking him; reasons which have not yet been made manifest, and which caused them to fear him as well as dislike him.

After reaching her room, she conversed with him a short time, trying to draw from him something of the intentions of her enemies. But Cecil was too wary to let slip any secrets. He replied courteously to her inquiries, but would not be trapped into revealing anything which she desired to know.

A fierce look swept to her face, when she saw she was to fail in this effort; and she arose and clapped her hands together sharply.

It seemed some kind of a call, ominous of danger; and Cecil sprang up, contemplating flight.

Before he could take a step, the negro, Jingo, rushed from behind some concealing curtains, and fell upon him furiously.

The boy uttered a sharp cry of pain and fright; which was not loud enough, however, to be heard in the street. But it penetrated to the kitchen and drew Laura Dutton to the scene of action.

She had observed him enter the house, and had feared for him, and so had been listening for some such indication of treachery.

The anguish of the cry aroused within her a hitherto unknown courage, and she flew up the stairway regardless of what the consequences to herself might be.

The negro was holding the boy down and binding him, when she reached the room.

"What are you doing with him?" she demanded, with hot indignation. "If you don't release him, I shall call for help!"

The madame was frenzied by this interruption and by the threat.

She sprang at the girl like an infuriated animal, and seizing her by the hair tried to pull her to the floor. The negro had the boy bound and gagged, and instantly leaped to the woman's assistance. His first act was to clutch the girl by the throat to keep her from crying out.

"You'll call for the police, will you?" the madame sneered. "We'll give you a chance to call to your heart's content!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

INTO THE DEPTHS.

LAURA DUTTON was powerless in the negro's grasp. She began to understand, too, that she had committed a great folly in thus impulsively rushing to the aid of the boy. She could have called to the police from the kitchen. But she had not thought of that at the time. It was too late, now. She had failed to help Cecil, and had brought to herself the same peril.

As soon as she saw that the negro would be able to handle the girl with ease, the madame flew to the doors opening on the stairways, and closed them to keep any sounds of the struggle from reaching the police.

By the time she had done this, the black had choked the girl into a state of semi-insensibility.

"Oh, yes, she'll call for the police!" scornfully, as she looked down at the girl's distorted face and discolored throat. "I've fooled with her just as long as I am going to!"

Cecil lay on the carpet, bound and helpless, his eyes rolling wildly as he saw the enactment of this dreadful scene. What terrible thing was in store for him, and for Laura Dutton, he did not know; but he had seen enough to cause him to fear the worst.

The negro seemed to know what was wanted, without any orders from Madame Muriel. He lifted Laura Dutton; and, while the woman held the curtains aside for him to pass, bore her into a little room but a few feet away.

This was the room which Laura had sought for and failed to find on the previous night. It was the room in which Singer Sam had been placed, and from which he had been so mysteriously conveyed. The police, under his guidance, had searched the house and failed to find it; and yet it had been there all the while.

Madame Muriel stood over the girl while the negro went to bring the boy. Laura was recovering from the temporary swoon into which she had been thrown by the merciless choking.

"Call, if you wish," the madame hissed, when she saw the light of returning consciousness—

ness. "Call, if you wish! No one can hear you here!"

The girl shivered and put up her hands appealingly. She might as well have pleaded with a stone.

"Do you know what we are going to do with you two?" as Cecil was tossed down rather roughly at Laura's side. "We intend to place you where you can shout to your hearts' content without any danger of disturbing the neighbors!"

The madame was giving free play to the hellish passions that had been for so many hours seething in her soul. She was becoming reckless of consequences, only thinking of the pleasure which this fierce measure of vengeance was bringing her.

"And when you shout and groan and wail and weep—as you will!—as you will!—remember Madame Muriel! She will not be here to listen to you, but she'll know of it; and the knowledge will help her on her way!"

The sentences were delivered like blows, and the cowering figures on the floor of the little room crouched and shivered as if in momentary expectation of death. Never before had they realized what a fiend incarnate was this Madame Muriel.

They were so oppressed by the horrors of their situation, they could scarcely have struggled if an opportunity for so doing had presented. No such opportunity came.

The negro and the woman stepped back from the room, the latter crying out to them to remain quiet under pain of death.

There were tasseled cords depending from one of the curtains, and the black gave these cords a sharp pull.

In spite of her fears of the madame, Laura lifted herself with a little shriek of terror. At first glance, she thought the ceiling was descending to crush them. It was not the ceiling, but was four walls in shape like a bottomless box. This slipped down with surprising rapidity, inclosing the little room in which they lay, and shutting them out from any hope of escape.

The little room was really an elevator, arranged to be concealed by these four descending walls. Whenever these were let down to the floor they were so joined with the walls on either hand that no break was visible, or only so slight a one that it was readily concealed by the curtains. This will explain why Singer Sam and his associates were unable to find the room into which he knew he had been conveyed.

The descent of the box-like contrivance shut out every ray of light, and so terrified the hapless prisoners that they began to utter agonized screams.

The madame's mocking laugh, sounding faint and far away, reached them; and they knew that should they shout never so loudly their chance of being heard was slight indeed.

With the lowering of the walls, the room itself appeared to be put in motion, and a gliding, swinging sensation was felt.

They knew then that they were really in an elevator, which was being sent down toward some underground depths, the gloom and terribleness of which they feared to picture.

Laura Dutton sprang to her feet, wild with frenzy, and ran from side to side of the little apartment, screaming hysterically and beating at the barriers with her hands.

Cecil Marsden was in a condition of equal terror; and, though he could not rise, added his cries to hers.

The elevator came to a halt with a jolt; and the girl, still rushing blindly about, felt her hands touch a door-like surface. It was a door, which was not difficult to open.

She slipped it aside, and was about to rush out, when she recalled Cecil's condition. With the opening of the door, a knowledge of where they were came to her. She knew they were in the basement.

She had been in it frequently, and had never noticed anything wrong there. But this elevator had upset all her ideas. She was ready to believe now that there was a hole in the basement floor by which they might be lowered to still further depths.

Nevertheless, she put aside her fears and turned back to Cecil. He was moaning and uttering inarticulate sentences. Laura reached down and endeavored to relieve him of his bonds. They had been knotted so fast this was impossible.

"There's a knife in my pocket," said the boy. "In my right pocket. Get it out, and cut them."

The knife was easily found, and with its blade the cords were severed. Then Laura half-dragged him from the elevator.

"I know where we are," was her encouraging whisper. "I hope we may be able to get out. I am familiar with the position of the door."

Her hopes were not so strong as she wished to make Cecil think them. She could hardly escape the conviction that the madame would not have consigned them to the basement if there was an easy way of egress.

The two joined hands, and without another word Laura led the way to the door. She found it, but it was barred so they could not get out.

It was useless to shout at this point for help; and, remembering the coal-hole, she turned from the door.

She found they could not reach that. It opened from a coal-room, which was filled with coal and locked from the basement side.

It was plain the madame had understood perfectly well what she was doing. They might scream and shout and hurl themselves against the hard walls, but no good could come of it.

Both were in such a state of high nervous tension they could not remain still; and so, when they found they could not gain access to the coal-hole nor make their way out by the basement door, they hastened back toward the elevator.

The place was almost pitchy dark, and they stumbled and bruised themselves as they raced recklessly along. To these small hurts they paid no heed, being almost unconscious of receiving them.

Laura stopped with a gasp of dismay, on arriving at the point where she expected to find the elevator. They had not thought of re-entering it, but to be near it would seem to place them in closer communication with the outer world. But the elevator was gone! It had been drawn up, and no trace of its recent presence there was discernible.

"Oh, what shall we do?" Cecil moaned, sinking disconsolately to the damp floor.

"This is dreadful!" was Laura's exclamation, her tones the very essence of terror and dismay.

There was apparently nothing for them to do only to remain there until help should come from some source. Would it ever come? That was a question they could not answer. They almost feared it would not.

No one could know they were in there, and therefore would not dream of searching the basement for them. And they had already convinced themselves that calls for aid were a mere waste of breath.

They could not sit there idle, however, when there was the slightest chance of finding a way out; and so they began a thorough search of the gloomy place, poking into every hole and cranny for some opening that might perchance lead the way to liberty.

Even this they abandoned after a time and gave themselves a prey to the deepest despair.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PLANNING FOR FLIGHT.

"LET them remain there and rot!" was the madame's vindictive cry as she saw the elevator descend with its burden. "Ay! let them rot! Or, better—let them wander there in the darkness until they go raving crazy!"

The bitterness of her hate for these two seemed to have suddenly concentrated itself into this effort against them.

"Now we must get ready to leave," turning upon the negro, who, like her, had been staring at the descending elevator. "We haven't a moment to lose now! Get everything in shape, while I go and speak to Tinchman and Baumgard."

She did not remain to see that her orders were obeyed, but rushed away to confer with the cracksman and the Jew.

She deviated from her direct course thither, however, and, turning into a room, took from a bureau-drawer some small articles which she placed in the pocket of her dress.

The cracksman and his companion-in-hiding had been conversing on the subject that was constantly uppermost in their minds, viz.—their escape and the securing of the valuables buried beneath the tree in the back yard. The madame's name had just been on their lips when she made her sudden appearance before them.

Some distance separated them from that portion of the house where the assault on Laura and Cecil occurred, and they were therefore not aware of what had so lately taken place.

"Speak o' the devil, an' you'll see one o' his imps," Tinchman whispered to the Jew, as their ears caught the rustle of the madame's garments. "Mebbe she hain't one o' 'em! Oh, no! She's a angel!"

The madame stood before them before the Jew could reply.

"I should like to see Baumgard a little while," she said. "It's not a matter of much consequence, but I'm having some trouble with Langston over that sale-bill and the value of the things that were said to be in the pawn-shop. Perhaps Baumgard can make an explanation that will satisfy him."

This was said to prevent the cracksman from suspecting her real motive in seeking out the Jew. It was satisfactory; and Tinchman did not once dream that she had made a false statement.

Baumgard followed her, also thinking she had spoken truly.

"See here, Baumgard," turning on him when they had reached the privacy of her den. "I'm satisfied the police intend to raid this house to-night, and I'm going to get out of it just as soon as I can!"

The Jew looked in the direction of the elevator room, the place in which he and Tinchman had

been hidden when the search for them had been made.

"I don't think you would be safe in there again," she asserted, interpreting the look.

She had her own reasons for wishing to make him think so.

The Jew shrugged his shoulders questioningly, at the same time elevating his hands in his characteristic way.

"Ach! Mine gootness! Ish dhot so?"

"It's so! That's why I called you out here. I don't think it will be long before the police make their appearance. Now, I want to help you. You and Tinchman both can't get out of here—at least not in the way I have planned. Tinchman will have to look out for himself. You assisted me in that pawn-shop matter, and now I have a chance to pay you back!"

Baumgard shrugged his shoulders again, thinking of the jewels concealed in the yard.

"Yes; you helped me, and I propose to help you. Cecil Marsden came up here a while ago. I had him put in the elevator and sent down to the basement. He is there now, and he can't get out. I wanted to punish him for some of his smartness, and at the same time to prepare a way for you to escape."

The Jew bewilderedly muttered his thanks.

"The clothes you wore when you went to Langston's with Tinchman," the madame continued, unfolding her plan, "are here in the house. I want you to dress as you did then. Then I can let you out the front way, and those policemen will never dream but that you are Cecil Marsden."

It struck the Jew as a brilliant idea. There was only one drawback to it. If he left by the front entrance, he could not unearth and carry away the things hidden beneath the tree. This he had resolved upon, as soon as he knew the madame was planning for his escape. Tinchman had thought to eventually rob the Jew, and now the Jew was scheming to serve him in like fashion.

"Ach! Dhot vas fine! But I am afear to go out py t'e vrent door. I am [avraid dhem men vill gatch me vhor sure!]"

The madame frowned, not liking this proposed alteration. She could not understand why it should be more dangerous to leave by the front door than by the rear; and she told Baumgard so.

"It ish as you say!" shrugging his shoulders.

"Then, I say go out by the front entrance! And we haven't much time to lose here talking! You'll find the clothing in that bundle. Go into one of the rooms and make the change; and hurry about it; for if Tinchman should come out and discover you it might spoil all!"

The Jew took the clothing and darted away. He had not abandoned the idea of securing the secreted valuables. He believed he could get them, though, even if forced to go out by the front.

As for the madame, she was pleased with the Jew's acquiescence; and bustled into another apartment, hurrying her own preparations for departure. If Baumgard succeeded in making his way through the police cordon by fooling the officers into a belief that he was Cecil Marsden, it would probably stave off for a time the searching of the house.

She found the negro already dressed in clothing closely resembling that worn by the police. She uttered a compliment, and hastened away to dress herself similarly. She hoped it would be possible to get out of the building thus attired.

Before making this change, however, she returned to see how the Jew was progressing. She found his make-up satisfactory. At a short distance, and especially in the dark, it would have been almost impossible to tell that the Jew was not the boy he appeared to be. The peculiar lump on the back was very marked.

"You'll do!" the madame confessed, admiringly. "Now get out of here just as quick as you can."

Baumgard was only too glad to obey; and he followed her obediently down the stairway. She opened the door; and when he had reached the pavement, watched him through a small aperture, as he walked carelessly up the street.

"He's sure to fool them!" clasping her hands delightedly.

She continued to gaze after him until he disappeared, and then remained there listening for any sounds which might indicate his discovery.

None came; and she climbed breathlessly back to the upper apartments, congratulating herself on the success of this venture.

The Jew, in spite of his apparent nonchalance, was trembling in every fiber as he strode away from the building. To be suspected, meant discovery, and a vista of horrors waited on that.

He scarcely dared to look about him as he strode up the street, fearing to see the beckoning finger of one of the officers, or to hear the command to halt. But he passed the gantlet in safety. His disguise was really so perfect that not one of the police spies dreamed he was aught but what he seemed to be.

He did not intend to abandon the valuables; and when he had walked around the square, or

sufficiently far to convince himself that he was unsuspected, he turned slowly about as if he had forgotten something and made his way toward the kitchen.

He remained unmolested; and, when safe within the shadow of the tree, he lost no time in unearthing the bags there buried. He could not carry half the things; but he took the diamonds and the most valuable of the smaller articles, and again left the house, jubilant over his success.

He had no regard for the feelings of the cracksmen, and cared as little for those of the madame. He argued, and very reasonably, that they would have served him in the same way.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN HYSTERICAL MOOD.

MADAME MURIEL, garbed as a man, made her way to the front entrance, some minutes after the departure of Baumgard, and looked out on the apparently deserted street. One of the police spies was standing only a few feet away; and when she saw him she drew back and crept softly up the stairs.

The time for flight had come! In conference with the major, it had been decided they should leave the house separately, to attract less attention, she to go first. This she was now endeavoring to do.

She stood for a while irresolute, after climbing the stairs; then she descended to the kitchen. She could not resist the feeling, as she opened the door, that Laura was there. She knew it was only a fancy, but it was only dispelled when she had entered the room and observed its cheerless look of discomfort.

The kitchen door she unlocked, and she let herself into the little back yard where Baumgard had been but a few moments before.

Calling up her courage, she walked unconcernedly in the direction of the gate, hoping to pass without troubling the policeman who was stationed near it.

She failed. The officer had been warned by Singer Sam to stop every one whom he did not know. He thought he knew Cecil, and so had let the Jew go; but the madame was not allowed to pass.

"He did not recognize her; but said, firmly: 'No one allowed to go by here, sir, who comes from that house! Those are my orders, and I must enforce them!'"

The madame recoiled as if struck a blow. She dare not speak to the man, for her voice might betray her; and therefore all she could do was to beat a confused retreat.

She was gasping for breath, when she regained the kitchen door. She had so counted on her ability to pass these sentinels, that this failure was crushing.

"What shall we do?" was her mental wail, as she looked blankly about.

She made her way into the kitchen and staggered up the stairway, intent on another talk with the major. Perhaps his ready wit would be able to suggest something!

Before she had regained the upper floor, she was startled by a ring at the front door!

During the occurrence of these exciting scenes, an important conference was under way in the office of the young lawyer.

Henderson, Bass, and the detective, had come there, shortly after Cecil left for Madame Muriel's establishment. This sending of Cecil for the madame's reply to Roscommon's offer, had not been wholly pleasing to, Singer Sam. He had doubted its wisdom and advisability, having for some time been convinced that the woman really meant to do nothing except fight for time.

Nevertheless, he had waived his objections; and Roscommon had dispatched Cecil on the perilous mission.

For nearly an hour the four men sat in the office awaiting the boy's return. They grew more and more anxious, as the slowly-moving minutes went by. All were feeling the tension of the approaching crisis. They knew that very much hinged on the events of that night. Either the madame and major would accede to the detective's demands, or they would attempt to escape. In the last event, their arrest would speedily follow, with all its sensations and exciting circumstances.

They tried to kill time by conversing on a variety of subjects; always returning, however, to the one uppermost in their minds.

When the hour was almost spent, Singer Sam arose and announced his intention of sallying forth to discover what had become of the boy.

This movement was greeted with approval by Henderson, who was fast becoming reduced to a state of fright over the long delay. Roscommon seemed equally pleased that a movement was to be inaugurated.

"I think it best for one of us to enter the house," said the young lawyer, as they hurried down the street, "and as I was the one to send the message I ought to be the one for that work. I can go in and claim that, as the boy has not returned, I became anxious, and came personally to receive her answer."

As this arrangement was satisfactory, he left them when they were yet a block from the build-

ing; and it was hissing at the door which had so startled the madame.

"The young man I sent here hasn't returned yet," he said, when she opened the door in answer to the ring. "So I thought I would come around myself?"

He had been compelled to wait many minutes; for the madame, before descending, had doffed the male attire and re-robed herself in her own clothing.

He could see that she did not want to admit him, and this made him determined to enter.

"I sent an answer to you by the young man," was her reply. "You don't mean to say he did not bring it?"

"He did not return to the office, at any rate!" She simulated surprise.

"That man there," and she laughed hysterically as she pointed to the policeman, who, in his citizen's dress, was half visible in the gloom just beyond. "He can tell you that the young man left here some time ago, for I am sure that he was standing there at the time!"

Roscommon was puzzled. Was the woman lying to him, when she knew that a word with the officer would reveal the falsehood?

He drew back hesitatingly, and she closed the door and fled up the stairs.

The lawyer heard the light tread of her feet, and was not sure he ought not to follow her. But he turned toward the policeman for the purpose of making inquiry.

The man substantiated the madame's claim. He had seen Cecil Marsden leave the house, he said, at about the time stated.

"You are sure you cannot be mistaken?" Roscommon questioned.

The officer was perfectly sure on that point. He was familiar with Cecil Marsden's appearance, and was positive he had seen him leave the house.

With his mind in a whirl, the lawyer hastened back to confer with his friends. If Cecil had left the house, of which there seemed not a doubt, what had become of him?

This was an enigma which even Singer Sam could not solve.

"There's something wrong here," was the latter's comment, a troubled look on his face. "There is treachery somewhere, though I confess I'm not able to put my finger on it. If the boy left the house, something has happened to him since leaving it. Otherwise, he would have returned to the office."

This was perfectly plain to all.

"It may be," starting as the thought came to him, "that the madame has been able to bribe the man stationed at the door. If she has done that, the chances are big that she is out of the house before now. You say she didn't appear to want to see you? Perhaps she was getting ready to leave, at that very moment!"

"And if so—" Henderson put in.

"If so, Cecil Marsden is yet in the house!"

Roscommon was filled with disquiet. Not even Henderson seemed more disturbed.

"I will go back to the house!" he declared. "And while I am gone, will you make a search for him? He may have returned to the office; or he may have been assaulted, and be now lying somewhere in a by-street or alley!"

He did not wait for them to agree to this proposition, so great were his fears; and in a very short time he was back at the front door of the house, pulling at the bell.

There was no response this time, and he began to think Singer Sam was right in his conjecture at least: that the madame had departed.

He turned sharply on the spy, almost convinced the latter had yielded to the influence of the madame's money.

"Is there a way by which I can get into this house?"

The man felt in the pocket of his coat and produced a key.

"This will unlock the door," he said giving the key to the excited lawyer. "I tried it to see that it would fit, when I first came here."

This did not seem the act of a guilty man, a thing which was noted by Roscommon!

The latter looked steadily at the officer for a moment; then walked to the door and applied the key to the lock.

The fit was perfect, and he had no difficulty in opening the door. He pocketed the key, and tramped up the stairway in search of some one of the occupants of the house. If Madame Muriel was there, he meant to see her.

The madame was there and, when she heard the heavy tread on the stairs, she came out of the seclusion of her den to ascertain its meaning. She was dismayed to behold the face of Roscommon. She had intended to exclude him and his friends until she could formulate some other plan of escape that might promise a hope of success. She was deep in this plan when he appeared before her.

The stairway had been dark, and the rooms occupied by the madame were only faintly lighted; yet Roscommon could see how pale and distracted was her appearance. She did not seem the same woman that she was a few days before.

She laughed a little hysterically.

"I see it is no use to try to bar you out. Well, come in, now that you are here! I've sent an

answer by the boy, as I told you. Perhaps you received it awhile ago. I have concluded to change it; and this new answer I was writing!"

Her words disclosed that she was on the verge of hysterics. There was in them a suggestion of both laughter and tears.

She invited him to a seat, and then held out a sheet of paper on which she had been writing.

Roscommon, shrewd as he was, was no match for this subtle woman. She had known he would return, and had prepared for his reception. This bit of writing was a part of the preparation. It was another stroke to gain time—to postpone the last, fatal, final hour.

"Read it!" she commanded. "It is my confession. You didn't let me finish it! If you had done that, I should have produced something worth your while!"

Her spirits were unnaturally volatile.

Roscommon glanced over the writing which she had denominated a portion of her "confession." It did indeed seem to be that.

There was not a great deal of it, the most important thing being a statement that she meant to cast Major Dinsmore aside and look out for her personal safety.

"If you had only permitted me to finish it!" laughing airily, when she saw he had reached this point in the reading. "I will finish it verbally. Not all I intended to say there, but enough to show you I am in earnest. I know I cannot get out of this house. We can't pay the money demanded by Mr. Benton. The result will be exposure, imprisonment and ruin!"

"Now, why should I fall with the major? I have no great reason to remain true to him! Should I do so, we must both suffer together! And thinking over that, brought me to this confession."

"Now, Mr. Roscommon, if you will pledge me that I may go free, I will write out a confession covering every point of which you are anxious to know; and have it ready for you in the morning."

Roscommon stared at her. Was the woman in earnest? Would she prove untrue to this man, her companion in crime for so many years?

A laugh that was so decidedly hysterical greeted this look, that Roscommon shuddered.

"You don't believe it? It is the way of the world, Mr. Roscommon; and I am of the world! I have never claimed to be a saint, as you ought to know!"

"But about Cecil Marsden?" the lawyer queried, tearing himself from this subject. "I am more anxious about his safety, just now, than about anything else. If you will tell me where he is, Madame Muriel, it will be worth much more to me than even this confession."

Again that hollow, hysterical laughter echoed through the room, and again Roscommon shivered and recoiled.

"It's very strange, Mr. Roscommon, that you will not believe me, when I tell you he left the house, taking with him my answer to your letter. If you think he is still here, you're at liberty to look for him. But he isn't here! I couldn't afford to deceive you; for, if I did, the confession I propose to make would not be likely to help me any. He left here, and went into the street; and if you hope to find him, you will have to look for him there!"

Roscommon knew not what to do or say. He felt that it would be useless to make a search of the house. Besides, the policeman—whom he was now inclined to think truthful—had also stated that Cecil had gone away from the place.

"Write out your confession," he said, rising to depart. "If it accomplishes anything to our purpose, I will do what I can to help you. This is all I can agree to!"

With this declaration he hastened from the room, his mind in a condition of complete bewilderment.

And when he was once more beyond earshot, the madame laughed louder and more hysterically than ever.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SINGER SAM'S CAPTURE.

SINGER SAM and his associates were not idle during Roscommon's absence. They called to their aid several members of the police force, and made a thorough search of all the streets and alleys in the vicinity. This occupied time, and the search was not ended when the young lawyer left Madame Muriel's.

Singer Sam separated from the others and extended his search further up-town, drawing near to the place where he had been in the habit nightly of setting up his torch.

There were a number of persons gathered on the corners in the near vicinity, who were waiting and wondering why the medicine-vender did not make his appearance.

This point was almost on a line running from the madame's establishment to Baumgard's pawn-shop; and as the detective turned back, after a distant survey of the waiting people, he saw a slight form slip from the shadows of one alley into those of another.

The slinking manner and a peculiarity of the form drew his quick attention. He had really caught sight of the Jew in the disguise of the hunchback.

Singer Sam started, almost willing to doubt the evidence of his eyes. He could not think that Cecil Marsden would have cause for slipping about in that stealthy manner. And yet the form had looked like Cecil's.

He ran rapidly toward the alleys, hoping to get another view.

Baumgard had halted in the second alley for the purpose of spying out the route ahead; and was stooping, in a crouching attitude, when the sounds of the detective's steps fell on his ears.

Having been expecting a pursuit, this threw him into a panic; and, without looking around to see who the pursuer was, he leaped up and fled along the alley like a frightened deer.

Singer Sam knew that here was something wrong. He had a good view of the fleeing man. The resemblance to Cecil Marsden was remarkable. But Marsden would not run in that manner.

A suspicion of the truth—but a dim suspicion, at first—came to him.

He blew shrilly on his whistle; and leaped forward in chase.

The vibrating blast of this police call smote the Jew with terror. He knew he had been discovered, and that, if he continued on to the street, he would be hemmed in and taken. Hence, at the first chance, he turned aside to seek refuge in another direction.

There were some half-deserted ware-rooms here, among them some open houses used for the storage of lumber. Into one of these he scrambled, thinking to evade pursuit for a time by concealing himself between the tall stacks of boards.

He might have succeeded in this had the detective not been so close at his heels. But Singer Sam saw him when he turned in here. He knew, too, exactly what the frightened man hoped to do.

Instead of following closely at the Jew's heels, he stopped at a point where the building would be in full view, and awaited the coming of the officers, whose pattering feet could already be heard.

Baumgard interpreted this movement as an indication that his pursuer was off the scent; and was disposed to congratulate himself, as he squeezed into a narrow opening. He rested here for an instant, and then burrowed deeper for greater security.

The police came up at a rapid run; and the detective speedily informed them of why he had sounded the call, and of the present location of the fugitive.

The men spread out, and quickly surrounded the lumber building.

When this had been satisfactorily accomplished, Singer Sam entered the place for the purpose of routing the pursued, very much as a dog might enter a covert to flush game.

Hearing the detective near him, Baumgard squeezed out at the other end of the opening and darted for the alley. Singer Sam saw him and plunged wildly after. The Jew was also seen by two members of the force. Thus hemmed in, he gave a frightened cry, and again changed his direction. But it was too late. He was speedily overhauled, and brought into submission by a threatened clubbing.

The detective dragged him to the nearest light.

"Ha! ha!" he exclaimed, when the Jew's features were revealed. "I had a strong notion that it was you. You wore my bracelets once! Now you can wear them again! And I fancy you won't get rid of these so easily!"

Suiting the action to the words, he snapped the irons about the wrists of the prisoner.

Baumgard was trembling so he could hardly speak, as the detective proceeded to question him.

"You came from Madame Muriel's? Is it not so? Speak up, or it may be worse for you!"

The Jew was so frightened that he readily confessed to the truth.

These questions were followed by others quite as pointed.

Baumgard, fearing he had made a mistake, refused to answer.

"Search him!" was the stern command.

"Ach! Mine gootness, no!" the words drawn from him by reason of his fears of losing the diamonds. "So hellup me, I haf notings apowet me!"

This was all the proof needed to convince his hearers that he had good reasons for wishing to avoid a search; and they therefore subjected him to one that was most thorough.

The diamonds were found, with the other valuables he had secreted on his person.

"Now, you will tell me what you are doing in that rig, and all about yourself, or I'll know the reason why!"

As he said this, he thrust a pistol into Baumgard's face, completing the Jew's terror.

"You will tell me, will you not, what I want to know? What are you doing here in these clothes?"

The Jew could not resist inquiries so strongly backed. He broke down, and whimpered like a whipped cur, assuring them that if they would only spare him he would confess to all he knew.

And this he did; telling how he had been concealed with Tinchman in Madame Muriel's

house, and how he had made his escape therefrom.

"And what about Cecil Marsden?"

Of Cecil the Jew denied all knowledge.

Finding that nothing further could be extracted from him, Singer Sam turned the prisoner over to one of the officers, gave the valuables to another—by whom they were to be held temporarily for safe-keeping—and then hastened back toward the madame's, sure that Cecil Marsden had fallen a victim to some act of treachery.

CHAPTER XL.

TINCHMAN'S TERROR.

To return to Tobe Tinchman.

He did not suspect that Madame Muriel was speaking falsely when she called the Jew from the room, and for a long time remained in sublime ignorance of her duplicity.

Before her coming, he and Baumgard had been discussing what their chances of getting away that night might be. They had resolved to wait until nearly morning before making a movement.

And so Tinchman, in blissful ignorance that his companion had already departed from the house, sat in his comfortable chair in the little back room and peacefully smoked his pipe.

By this it is not meant that he was contented or wholly at ease. None knew better than he what manner of danger lay about him; but, as the time for action had not come, he tried to fill the period of waiting with as much comfort as he could.

As minute after minute passed, however, and these linked themselves into an hour, he could not further control his uneasiness. He could not understand why the madame should wish to confer for so great a while with Israel Baumgard.

When he could stand the suspense no longer, he knocked the ashes from his pipe, and went in search of the madame.

He found her shivering and moaning in the privacy of her den. Roscommon had only a few moments before departed.

"What's become of that infernal Jew?" the cracksman growled, presenting himself before her in no very amiable mood.

The madame looked up at him with hot and tearless eyes. Tinchman drew back, as he glanced into their blazing depths. The madame had so much the appearance of a madwoman, at that moment, that he was half frightened.

"Where is Baumgard?" he repeated, a considerable modification in his tones.

"I don't know where he is, and I don't care!" was the wrathful answer. "Why do you come here bothering me about him? Haven't I enough affairs of my own to look after? Go and hunt him!"

"But you called him away!" Tinchman declared, not to be beaten in this manner. "He hain't come back sence you called him out, an' that was more'n an hour ago!"

"Go and hunt him!" said the madame, coldly. "I'm not his owner. If he didn't come back to you, that's his fault and not mine. You ought to have tagged him, so that you would have no trouble in putting your hand on him!"

"See hyer, Madame Muriel!" and the cracksman's face flamed. "This hain't no time fer nonsense, this hain't! I want to know where that Jew is. If he hain't in this house, you know what's become of him!"

The madame laughed at him as she had at Roscommon—that hysterical, blood-chilling laugh.

"I want to know what you have done with him!" drawing back, yet resolved to maintain his ground. "If he's gone out of this house, Madame Muriel, you know it!"

"What are you teasing me for, then, if you know I know it? I suppose he has gone out of the house! Of course he did, if he got the chance; and it may be that he got the chance. It's not going to be so easy, though, for you or me to get out. I tried it a little while ago, and I ought to know!"

Tinchman saw that in this last statement she was in earnest, and a feeling of fear took possession of him. He saw, too, that Madame Muriel had no further use for him, now that she could no longer make him valuable to her; and cared little what became of him.

"That's all right!" turning angrily away. "If you want to go back on a feller at this stage of the game, you can do it I reckon! But, hark you! if I'm took, there'll likely be others that'll have a close call!"

Her only answer was another chilling laugh.

On leaving her, Tinchman's first act was to make as thorough a search as possible of the house, or rather those rooms which he was able to enter. To his surprise the place seemed wholly deserted.

He descended into the kitchen, and from thence peered out into the yard. The officer was still on duty. He was almost afraid to venture out, but his desire to see if the treasure was still concealed beneath the tree was strong on him. He crept down the steps and over the ground until the tree was reached. It required only a glance to show that Baumgard had been there before him. The earth was upheaved, and such

of the valuables as Baumgard could not take were lying beside the cavity.

Tinchman was furious; and in sulphurous whispers proceeded to anathematize the Jew and the woman.

He secured what remained of the valuables, and stole softly back to the house. He deposited them in the corner of the kitchen, concealing them beneath some papers, and then again visited Madame Muriel.

"You helped that scamp to git out' o' hyer!" he asserted, suddenly facing her.

She seemed not to have moved from her position since his departure.

"I did!" she confessed, with rare frankness. "I have helped you at other times, and I helped him. What of it? If you're tired of my service, go out and give yourself to those wolves!"

She pointed toward the window to indicate that she meant the police.

Tinchman began to curse her bitterly; but she only laughed at him; and he again left her.

He was now becoming greatly terrified. He saw that because of inability or lack of desire she did not intend to aid him. He knew that very possibly she was not able to aid herself. But he could not forgive her for this deception, and for helping the Jew to leave the house.

Plans for getting away thronged quickly through his mind, but they were as quickly abandoned as impracticable.

As much as Tinchman knew of the secrets of Madame Muriel and Major Dinsmore, he had never been received fully into their confidence. He believed there was a hidden way by which one might get out of the house; and he reasoned that when they got ready, she and the major would go by that route, and leave him to look out for himself. He resolved, therefore, to make a quiet search for this outlet.

He returned to his room and got the lamp for that purpose. Then he made his way stealthily to the kitchen, keeping to the corridor that he might not be detected by the madame.

There was a trap-door in the kitchen by which one could gain access to the basement door without passing through the yard. He lifted this trap-door; and, as he did so, withdrew precipitately. Strange and frightening sounds had reached him.

"What's that?" he asked himself, peering into the hole.

Again the sounds came, wailingly and sobbingly. They were made by the imprisoned inmates of the basement.

CHAPTER XLI.

A WAY OUT.

CECIL MARSDEN and Laura Dutton had never endured a more terrifying time. Both were timid; and, when they found they could not escape, they crouched helplessly in the gloom, almost giving themselves over to despair.

When they became more accustomed to the darkness, and could see about them without great difficulty, their hopes arose slightly, and they ventured to make another round of the basement. It yielded nothing, except a fresh fright when some rats scampered from a dark corner.

The horrors of the place grew on them more and more; and they could already foresee their doom. It was to remain there until they perished of starvation, when their bodies would become a prey to the routed rodents. More rats appeared, as they prosecuted their search; and they retreated almost hysterically to the point from which they had started.

Cecil recalled how the detective had been spirited from that house; and thoughts of the great danger to which he had been subjected did not tend to restore his own equanimity.

Thinking of this, however, led him to try the door again. He could not shake it; and he returned to the companionship of Laura Dutton.

To occupy themselves, and in a measure sustain their courage, they tramped aimlessly about. The dampness of the place had begun to chill them, and it required this physical exercise to keep them from succumbing to its influence.

They conversed much of their friends, whom they believed to be then hunting vainly for them. They could not doubt but that a raid would be made on the house, and they calculated the chances of being found at that time. There was distraction in these thoughts, if nothing else. By means of them they were better enabled to endure the slow passage of time.

Suddenly Laura Dutton started.

"Did you not hear that?" she asked, leaping to her feet and looking anxiously at Cecil.

Cecil had heard nothing; but he also arose, and together they stood listening for a repetition of the noise which had attracted her attention.

It came again, from the direction of the kitchen; and was made by Tobe Tinchman, who was at that moment approaching the trap-door.

They clutched each other for support, as their heads whirled with this new hope.

"The raid is being made!" Cecil exclaimed. "I feel sure of it. That's some of our friends hunting for us!"

He ran toward the barred door, closely fol-

lowed by Laura; and, standing near it, they shouted together with all the strength of their lungs.

The trap-door was lifted, and a ray of light from Tinchman's lamp penetrated to the interior of the basement through a crack in the door.

They felt they could not be mistaken now; and screaming and laughing together they again sent up their calls, beating on the door with their hands.

These were the sounds which had so frightened Tinchman and caused him to draw back.

He set down the lamp, with an oath, and bent forward to catch the meaning of these strange noises. He was superstitious, and his first inclination was to retreat from the place without delay. But he reconsidered, and again bent his head in a listening attitude.

"If that hain't Laura Dutton a-yellin' there like all possessed, then I'm fooled!" was his mental ejaculation. "I wonder, now, if the madame has shet her up in there? 'Twould be jest like her to do sech a trick!"

He would have advanced straight to the basement door, had not Cecil's voice also reached him. This assured him that two persons were in the basement, a fact which greatly puzzled him.

At the same time it aroused his curiosity, and he resolved to see what it meant. He had not given up the idea that there was some way of escape opening from this basement. Hence, he again lifted the lamp and descended the steps. He expected to find the door locked; but he had a large number of keys which he made use of in his various burglarious enterprises, and one of these served his purpose.

Cecil and Laura had not for a moment ceased their calls; fearing that after all their friends might not hear them, and thus they should be left to their fate. But they were reassured when Tinchman descended the stairway.

They wept hysterically, as they heard him fumbling at the lock, and shouted again in the very boisterousness of their joy. But when the door flew open, they were doomed to disappointment. They saw not one of their friends, but the cracksman, whom they feared. They felt certain he had not come to their assistance with any kindly intentions, but rather that he had been sent there by the madame to subject them to still further indignities.

Now that the way to liberty seemed to lie so plain before them, they made a simultaneous rush for the opening; and, in doing so, tripped the cracksman. The lamp felled from his hand with a crash; and, as the oil poured out, it caught from the flame of the wick, and blazed up with a furious roar, as the strong draught caught it.

CHAPTER XLII.

HEMMED IN.

TOBE TINCHMAN gave vent to his anger in an ill-tempered snarl. But the thing had been done and could not be undone. It was like Humpty-Dumpty, the egg of the famous puzzle, which sat on a wall and got a great fall.

"Not all the king's horses, nor all the king's men, Could put Humpty-Dumpty together again!"

The lamp had been broken, the oil was flaming, and a conflagration seemed imminent.

Tinchman looked at the burning fluid, and at the flying causes of the accident; then darted into the basement. He felt that, if he found the opening which he believed would lead him to liberty, he had no time to lose.

He made a running search of the place, stopping for a moment near the coal-hole to consider the chances of getting out that way. He believed he could do it, by opening the door to the bin and removing enough coal to permit of an approach to the opening. But that would take a great deal of time, and he had no time to spare.

He made the round of the basement, but found no way out; and returned to the stairway by which he had entered.

The flames were mounting furiously, a portion of the stairway being already eaten through; and he saw that unless a fire-alarm could be turned in and prompt measures taken, the house was destined to destruction.

"Let 'er burn!" he growled, in a savage temper. "Let 'er burn! I don't owe the madame any good-will; an' I couldn't stop the plaguy thing if I wanted to. It'll bring down the Fire Department, an' mebbe that'll give me a chance ter slide!"

On the whole, after he had had time to think of it, he was not disposed to quarrel with what he had been deeming a piece of ill-luck. This accidental starting of the fire might be, he reasoned, the best thing that could have befallen him.

"Let 'em look out for themselves," thinking of Dinsmore and the madame. "She tole me to look out for myself; an' you bet that's what I'm a-goin' to do!"

It was not the easiest thing in the world for him to pass up the stairway now. But he did it; and again halted in the kitchen to consider

the proper course to pursue in view of this new element in his calculations.

"I'll git as near to the outside as I can! Then, when the firemen bu'st in the doors, I'll make a run for it!"

He had not forgotten the valuables concealed in the corner of the kitchen. He took up the bags containing these, closed the door leading to the basement to keep the light of the fire from reaching and betraying him, and then crouched in the darkness to await the moment for action.

Laura Dutton and Cecil Marsden had fled by Tinchman in breathless haste; and, as soon as the kitchen was gained, had hurried toward the door leading from it to the outer world. They found the door locked; Tinchman had locked it to increase his own safety.

They were panic-stricken. Believing they would be instantly pursued by him, they fled wildly up the stairway.

They halted again when they reached the upper corridor.

"We ought to go to the madame and tell her of the fire!" Laura whispered, her humanity overcoming her repugnance and fear.

"Do you know where she is? Perhaps if we tell her, she will let us out!"

With this purpose in view, they were turning toward the madame's rooms, when they were frightened by the appearance of the negro.

They recoiled; and again retreated toward the kitchen. They were afraid of Tinchman, but they were more afraid of the black. They knew not what to do; but thought if they could again reach the kitchen door before Tinchman came out of the basement, they might make themselves heard by the people on the street.

They found, however, when too late, that Tinchman had already returned from the basement. He had closed the trap-door, and was crouching in the gloom. Their first knowledge of his presence, was a command for them to halt.

He got up from the floor at the same time, and presented what they believed to be a pistol at their heads.

"You two have been rampin' over the house jist enough!" and he enforced the statement with a bitter oath. "You've set the house afire, an' I don't know what other meanness you hain't done. Now, you two stand right there, er set right there, I don't keer which! But you hain't a-goin' out of this kitchen ag'in! If you try it, it'll be the wuss fer you!"

His tone was so imperious that they dared not disobey, especially as it was backed by that menacing pistol; and so they crouched shiveringly together, fearing to make a movement or utter a word.

Tinchman had his own reasons for thus holding them. His uneasiness was constantly increasing, and his desperation was increasing in like ratio. It occurred to him that when the supreme moment came he might be able to make use of Cecil and the girl to shield himself. If he could do nothing else, he could push them out in front of him, when the door opened, and thus protect himself from the shots of the police. He resolved he would not be taken.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AT THE WINDOW.

As Singer Sam hurried back, after the capture of the Jew, he knew that Madame Muriel had falsified, and that the policeman was mistaken in saying that Cecil Marsden had departed from the house. The one who had departed had been Baumgard, disguised to represent the hunchback. What had become of Cecil? This was a question he could not answer, and which sorely tried him.

He was loth to communicate to his companions the story of the Jew. But this was a necessary thing; and he did it as speedily as possible.

The effect on Henderson was most distressing to witness. His heart seemed to break, and the most direful fancies to run riot in his troubled mind, as he thought of Cecil's probable fate. He also thought of Laura, and wondered what ill had befallen her; and he accused himself causelessly and mercilessly for permitting her to remain so long at the madame's.

It was plain to all of them that they had delayed too long in the raid on the house.

"We will not stop here longer!" the detective declared, voicing the general wish. "We will force our way into the building, and see what we can discover there. We will find out what has become of Cecil, if we have to apply torture to Madame Muriel and Major Dinsmore to accomplish it!"

Roscommon was no less excited and wrought up; and accordingly an advance on the house was immediately commenced.

They approached it by way of the front. Not a light gleamed anywhere within the building. All was dark, gloomy and forbidding; and, to their anxious minds, prophetic of ill.

A number of vigorous rings at the bell failed to arouse any one, and Singer Sam applied to the door the policeman's club with which he had provided himself. The result was the same. No

one appeared to open the door, and they began to fear for the worst.

"Fellers, I smell fire!"

Jim Bass thrust his nose into the air, and sniffed like a dog scenting game.

Now that their attention was directed to it, the others also became aware of the pervading odor of smoke.

They could not at first locate it, but the impression grew on them that it emanated from the house.

Without previous warning, the flames burst into view at that moment, becoming visible through one of the windows. They had eaten upward from the basement through the floor, and were now spreading at a terrific and alarming rate, there being nothing to impede their progress. Those on the street saw that within a very few moments the entire building would be on fire.

At the detective's call, the policeman came forward with the key to the door. But before it could be applied, a series of startled cries from overhead drew their attention and diverted them from their present purpose.

They ran further out into the street to ascertain the meaning of these cries; and by the aid of an adjacent lamp were able to see, at one of the upper windows, the faces and forms of Cecil Marsden and Laura Dutton. These two were screaming frantically, and looking appealingly into the street.

They had been held for some time in the kitchen by Tobe Tinchman; but an unguarded movement on Tinchman's part had revealed to them that the supposed pistol with which he was threatening them was only a stick; and they had fled with all speed from his presence. The cracksman had had a weapon, but he had mislaid it that night, and it was not now in his possession.

Cecil and Laura could already feel the heat of the fire on the floor beneath their feet. Tinchman kept them from trying to get out by the kitchen door; and so there was nothing for them to do but to retreat to the upper apartments. They knew that the fire would soon have the entire building in its grasp.

Again prompted by feelings of humanity they sought for the madame, intending to warn her of this new danger. They could not find her. The rooms she usually occupied were locked, and thus the way to the front entrance was cut off.

Overpowered by the terrors of their situation, they hastened as swiftly as they could to the third floor. Here they succeeded in forcing up one of the windows; and now they were looking down into the street, and calling wildly to the little group of men they beheld there.

Without any command, Jim Bass flew across the street and turned in an alarm of fire.

All of them saw, however, that before help could come from the Fire Department, the flames would jeopardize the lives of these friends.

Henderson and Roscommon were the first to rush into the building, and they directed their endeavors to the rescue of Cecil and Laura. The fire was breaking through into the rooms on the second floor, when they reached the top of the stairway. Great tongues of flame licked upward, and catching in the many hangings of the rooms quickly transformed the interiors into a mass of surging and fiery waves through which it was difficult for the men to make their way.

Singer Sam was delayed for a moment at the street door, and when he bounded up the stairway, the two who had preceded him had vanished beyond the flaming barriers.

An exclamation from the direction of the kitchen drew his attention thither, and convinced him that some of the inmates of the house were trying to escape. Believing that Henderson and Roscommon would be able to accomplish the rescue of their friends, he bounded down the stairway, which was already intolerably hot and filled with smoke.

Before Tinchman was aware of it, the detective had penetrated his place of concealment. The cracksman stood at bay; and, when Singer Sam rushed upon him, grappled with him in a desperate struggle.

The heat within the kitchen was almost unbearable. Tinchman had only endured it so long because he expected that every moment would bring the firemen. He had been about to take the desperate chance of darting from the house and striving to pass the police spy, when the detective sprung down the stairway.

"Take that! will ye?" Tinchman ejaculated, aiming a furious blow.

This was deftly avoided; and as they clinched, they fell to the floor and rolled over and over in struggling confusion. Singer Sam had in his hand only his police club, and this he was prevented from using by the rapidity of Tinchman's movements. The cracksman was trying to get at a knife which was in one of his pockets.

The detective discovered the motive of these frantic efforts in time to prevent the consummation of Tinchman's wish.

They were almost equally matched in strength and agility; and if the fight had been fought to a finish what its outcome might have been cannot be told.

It was interrupted by the coming of Jim Bass.

The cowboy had followed closely on the detective's heels—so closely that he beheld him deviate from his course and leap down the kitchen stairway.

Bass had hesitated for a moment, not knowing whether to follow the detective or continue on toward those upper rooms where Cecil and Laura were known to be and to which it was reasonably certain Henderson and Roscommon had ascended. But the sounds of the struggle in the kitchen reached him and decided him as to his course.

"Hi, there!" he yelled, dancing about the combatants. "Hold still there a minute, you two fellers, till I can tell t'other frum which! I've got it in fer one o' you, an' I'll perceed to do him up jist as soon as I find out which it is. Hi, there! Hold on!"

They did not "hi, there!" neither did they "hold on." It is doubtful if either comprehended a word of Bass's talk. They were fighting with fierce desperation, each too anxious to get the better of his foe to pay any heed to these cries.

The cowboy caught Tinchman by a leg and pulled with all his strength. The aid thus given Singer Sam permitted the latter to turn the tide of battle, and he got the fingers of his muscular right hand about the cracksman's throat.

That was the beginning of the end of the fight. Within a very few moments Tinchman was choked into due subjection; and within a very few more he had the hated handcuffs on his wrists.

"Hooray! Cock-a-doodle-doo-o-oo!" crowed the irrepressible Bass, when this had been accomplished. "I say, we'll have that in the papers to-morrow! That was a fight wuth speakin' of! One o' the kind o' fights you read about!"

"We'll not be able to read the papers, though, if we don't get out of here in short order!" said the detective, pointing to the flames, which were now bursting through the kitchen floor only a few feet away. "If we don't get out of here, we'll be hemmed in, and in a very little while!"

Tinchman was lying on the floor, glaring at them with a vindictiveness seldom paralleled. He was furious with impotent rage, and if his looks did not belie him, he was almost wishing at that moment that the fire might consume these enemies, even if in so doing it licked up his heart's blood as well.

Singer Sam saw this look of deadliest hate, but paid no attention to it. He could afford to be lenient to a fallen foe. And just then, he had something of more importance to occupy his attention. Bass, in his exultation of spirits, had almost forgotten the peril they were in from the fire. Now, as the detective pointed it out, his florid face paled.

The flames were roaring between them and the stairway, and between them and the outer door.

"We'll have to make a dash for it!" Singer Sam said, with quiet determination. "We'll not gain anything by standing here!"

He pointed to Tinchman, who had also been ornamented with anklets of iron, and who was correspondingly helpless.

"Lay hold of him! I don't intend he shall get away, at any rate."

As he gave the command, he seized a strip of the kitchen carpet.

"The very thing! This will make us fire-proof!"

Bass flew to his assistance, and the carpet was dragged from the floor.

They wrapped this around them as a protection, also swathing the cracksman in it; and then they seized him by shoulders and heels, and, bearing him thus, made a rush for the stairway.

They passed through the flames without receiving so much as a burn; and very shortly had their prisoner safe in the street and in the hands of the police. Nor were the bags of treasure left behind. They had been light and portable, and had been borne with ease.

Meanwhile, Tom Henderson and Paul Roscommon had not been idle. They had found Cecil Marsden and Laura Dutton flame-girdled in the upper room. The corridor through which they had to pass to reach them was filled with smoke and fire. Through this they rushed with worthy recklessness, finding Cecil and the girl still at the window.

Henderson and Roscommon had had much trouble in making their way through the rooms of the second floor, because of the flames and the locked doors. Two of these they had unlocked, and one they had smashed in, Henderson having done this by hurling his tremendous weight against it.

The two within the room uttered cries of delight, when they beheld their friends; but these changed to anxiety and even to pity when they saw their scorched and blistered appearance. Beard, hair and clothing had been singed, and the white marks of some severe burns were visible.

"It's a regular hell back there!" Roscommon panted. "I am afraid we can't pass through it again!"

They heard the rush of the fire-engine in the street below, and looked out of the window. A number of firemen were endeavoring to hoist a

ladder, under the direction of Bass and the detective. But though the ladder was spliced, it fell many feet short.

"If we only had a rope!" and Henderson looked wistfully about the room.

There was nothing of the kind there, but the clothing on the bed suggested an idea. It was quickly stripped off and placed on the floor. Then the articles were torn into strips and knotted together, and when this was done a rope had been fashioned of sufficient length and strength to sustain the weight of one person.

By means of it Cecil was lowered; and, when he had reached the ladder, the rope was drawn up and Laura was let down in the same way. Roscommon was next, the rope being steadied by the strong hands of the miner; and when all three stood in security on the ground, Tom Henderson lowered himself from the window hand-over-hand.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A TRAGIC SIGHT.

WHAT had become of Madame Muriel and Major Dinsmore?

This was the question which now agitated the breasts of Singer Sam and his friends. In their passage through the house they had seen neither. True, they had not entered all of the rooms, nor had they entered the room which the reader has known as Madame Muriel's "den."

They turned to Tobe Tinchman for an answer.

"They're up there some'eres!" Tinchman declared, secretly delighted with the hope that the detective might be baffled in securing them.

He had no regard for the personal safety of the madame and the major, but the detective's discomfiture was a thing to be desired.

Although Tinchman could not have been sure of it, he was correct in stating they were still in the house. They were there; and one of them was destined not to leave it alive.

Madame Muriel was indeed on the verge of insanity when she was visited by Tinchman in his search for the Jew. Her failure to pass the police spy had driven her to desperation; and this combined with the tremendous pressure on nerve and brain under which she had for so many hours been laboring, was almost enough to unseat her intellect. She was beginning to believe that escape would be impossible.

Yet she did not entirely give up hope until later. She again descended toward the street, and looked out to see if there was any relaxing of vigilance on the part of the spies. There was something to encourage her; but, after further delay she made another effort to leave the house, this time by way of the front entrance. It failed as the first had done; and then she gave herself up to fury and despair.

"Major!" she cried, returning to her room, and from that point shouting to him. "There's no use to try any more!"

In response to the call, the negro came forward; and, when she saw him, she wept and laughed by turns, in frenzied abandon.

There was some wine on the table, and she filled two small glasses, her hand shaking as she poured out the liquid.

"You couldn't find any way out?" questioningly. "Ah! I thought not. But there's one way out, major! they can't close that against us!"

She set the bottle down, and looked at him—for this black was none other than Major Dinsmore—with eyes which burned with incipient insanity. "No, major! there's one route they can't close against us!"

She laughed again, and Dinsmore drew back. The hollowness of that laugh told him that the woman before him was mad.

"What do you mean?" he asked, shivering, in spite of himself.

"Just what I said, major! One way is always open! It is the way that leads to death! Are you afraid to walk in it?"

"But we can surrender ourselves!" he exclaimed, as if desiring to plead with her. "They cannot do more than imprison us!"

"Imprisonment! None of that for me! Ah! major! I see you are inclined to be cowardly!"

She arose and produced the white powder, a portion of which she had dropped into the wine offered to Singer Sam.

"Will you drink it with me?" holding it up that he might see it. "It will bring a sleep that will know no waking. Dare you drink it with me, major?"

The look of insanity was deepening in her eyes.

"I will not!" he declared. "I'm not such a fool as to throw my life away in that manner."

The laugh that issued from her lips ended in a high, piercing shriek.

"Just one glassful, major! I say you shall drink it!"

There was such deadly menace in the voice, that he turned from her and started as if to leave the room.

"Ha, ha, ha! You fear the fire, do you not? Do you hear it? Do you smell it? The house is on fire, major! The kitchen and the basement are in flames, and so are the lower rooms! Ha, ha, ha! I welcome it! It cannot hurt the life-

less flesh! Better to be consumed than to lie in the grave and become food for worms; or to lie in a prison and rot! Don't you think so, major! Then drink this with me! Drink it, and neither the fire nor our foes can harm us!"

It was the first intimation Dinsmore had had that the building was on fire. The knowledge was appalling.

"You are a fool!" he said. "If the house is afire, the sooner we surrender the better it will be for us!"

A swift change passed over her face.

He saw it, and turned to leave the room, feeling that argument and persuasion would be alike useless. But he had no sooner presented to her his back than with a swift motion she drew a revolver and fired: and he fell prone and bleeding to the floor.

The powder was dashed down, as was the pistol; and she rushed to him and bent tenderly and lovingly over what she believed to be his lifeless form.

"Forgive me, major! Forgive me! I had to do it!"

The firemen broke into this room not many minutes afterward, and they found the two lying side by side on the superheated floor. The major was seriously wounded and unconscious; and the woman was dead. Her features were drawn and distorted, and there was about her a strange, peachy odor, showing the use of that speediest of all deadly drugs, prussic acid.

Six months later, there was a double-wedding in Mineral Gap. The "rookery," as Tom Henderson had called his house, was ablaze with light, and was filled with song and laughter and merry-making. The happy parties whose fortunes were at that time joined for life, were Paul Roscommon and Nellie Quindaro—the latter known to the reader throughout this story as Cecil Marsden; and Tom Henderson (whose name was not Henderson, at all, but Thomas Quindaro) and Laura Dutton.

Thomas and Nellie Quindaro had by the merest chance discovered that Major Dinsmore and Madame Muriel were the ones to whom they owed their misfortunes. They had been in Mineral Gap not more than a month before the coming of Wilfred Benton, the detective, who had been sent there by relatives of the Quindaros—these relatives being partly instigated in their efforts, no doubt, by a desire to share in the money to be recovered.

The hunchback disguise and the male attire were adopted by Nellie to keep the madame and the major from suspecting them before they had accumulated evidence sufficient to establish their claims; and this was, also, the reason for their adoption of false names.

The double part played by Major Dinsmore has already been seen. As a negro, he could safely commit crimes which he could not in his own proper person—such deeds, for instance, as the setting of the spring-gun and the attempt to blow up the house. If seen at such times and pursued, he could have escaped punishment by a change of outward appearance; the negro could vanish, and not all the officers of the West could have found him—for the reason that there would be no such person to find.

Dinsmore lived long enough to make a confession of his misdeeds, and to do what he could to repair an irreparable injury. He instructed that what property he had should be disposed of to settle the Quindaro claim. The diamonds brought large sums, as did some other valuables; but the amount obtained fell short of the twenty thousand which the detective had demanded.

The revelation of the true character of Henderson and Cecil Marsden was made to Benton at the interview in the kitchen at the rookery, which had so excited Jim Bass's curiosity.

Bass was present at the wedding, as jovial and as boastful as ever. He did not threaten Thomas Quindaro with condign punishment for marrying the girl on whom he had himself set his youthful affections, but muttered anathemas against him should he not treat her in a proper and becoming spirit—a thing entirely unnecessary, as the reader need not be told.

And so, with song and laughter, the drama was played out, and the curtain rung down.

THE END.

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